

THE SECRET OF CHAUVILLE

By the Same Author

THE GANG

MOON OF VALLEYS

THE PRINCESS GALVA

THE MAN WITH THE
RED BEARD

THE SECRET OF CHAUVILLE

BY

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"THE PRINCESS GALVA," "MOON OF VALLEYS,"
"THE GANG," ETC.



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To

GUY THORNE

*in memory of many pleasant
meetings—from Café Royal to
Cornish Coast*

BRIGHTON, 1911

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THE SECRET OF CHAUVILLE

PROLOGUE

1793

*"Vive le son, vive le son !
Dansons la Carmagnole,
Vive le son du cannon !"*

THE song of the Revolution, shouted at the top of a tuneless and wine-laden voice, came from behind the red-curtained bay window of the "Star of Navarre" in the city of Blois. Floating out into the still courtyard, it polluted the calm of the spring evening and caused a traveller who had but that moment climbed, stiff-legged, down from the saddle, to bite his under lip in irritation and to lead his mount into the shadow of a farm waggon which stood by the gateway leading to the stables.

There was no ostler at hand to attend to the animal; but Remy Perancourt had ridden far and the horse needed no restraining hand on his bridle, but stood there with steaming neck out-

stretched to nibble at a few poor ears of corn which showed at the tail-board of the cart.

Remy advanced cautiously to the vine-framed window. The song had now ceased and had given place to oath-interrupted laughter. The man in the courtyard, his body well screened against any sudden surprise from the room he was watching, availed himself of a small aperture in the blind—for it was the spring of 1793, a time when man looked with suspicion on man, and when it were well to move warily and act with an infinite caution.

It was but a small portion of the apartment of the "Star of Navarre" that was visible, but it showed enough for Remy to draw back with a muttered curse. Seated at the head of the black oak table was a man, bearded and very dirty. On the board before him, papers and documents were mixed with the remains of a meal and with empty wine flasks. More noteworthy still was the curious assortment of weapons spread over the person of the sinister-looking individual himself. From the pocket of the greatcoat which was hung over the back of his chair, a small blunderbuss showed its stock; in a belt at his waist two other firearms were ready to hand; whilst a poignard and a stiletto, in their nakedness, kept the other weapons company. Remy did not need to raise

his eyes from this arsenal to the evil face to know that he was looking at the infamous Herat, the devilish factotum of the Committee of General Safety, the friend and confidant of Robespierre, the wretch to whom nothing was sacred and who spared neither friends nor family so that his fatal lists be filled and Madame Guillotine be not kept waiting.

Often had he seen the armoured figure of the "ferret of the Marais quarter," and he knew well the man's cowardice, how in addition to his superfluity of weapons he never moved without a bodyguard of armed ruffians, eager and ready to do the bidding of their hideous master. Remy could not, from his peephole in the blind, see how many the man had with him now, but he judged from the sound, and from the shadows that flashed at intervals across the wall and the blind, that they numbered at least half a dozen, and he fell back to where his tired horse, with drooping neck, nearly slept in the shadow of the cart.

Remy stroked the moist mane, and, holding the nostrils to prevent a possible neigh, led the poor spent beast across the cobbles and through the stone archway to the street. He gave a glance behind him to see that all was quiet, then mounted and, taking the way that lay southward, left the city by the Barrier d'Artois.

The plains of Touraine stretched out grey to the horizon in a level monotony, and the little marshy lakes reflected the glory of the setting sun. Behind the horseman, the towers and minarets of the city showed a delicate tracery against the evening sky and from some belfry a peal of bells sounded. Once free of the city, Remy had allowed the bridle to slip unheeded upon the mane and was letting his horse make his own pace, whilst the rider gave himself up to speculation on why it was that Herat, the friend of the Terror and daily companion of Fouquier-Tinville, should be so far from Paris.

He knew that the Convention was in the habit of sending out proconsuls to spy upon the doings of the provincial tribunals, but he did not remember having heard that Blois had a tribunal. He told himself that it must be the biggest of game that could draw Herat away from the happy hunting-ground of the capital, and he cursed him roundly for his presence at the "Star of Navarre."

For the last two hours Remy had been promising himself the comfort of wine and supper, a comfort not easily understood save by those who have spent twenty hours in the saddle, and his horse had doubtless, in his own way, had very similar thoughts. And now, to be forced into the remaining two miles of his journey—

which he had intended to resume, refreshed, in the morning—was not pleasant. Besides, the little hamlet of Massey, which was his destination, boasted but a poor rest for travellers—and they would not be expecting him at the Château de Chauville until the morrow. On second thoughts, however, Remy told himself that Herat's presence in Blois complicated matters, and his errand, which hitherto had seemed to call for no undue haste, now took on a new and more sinister significance.

So deep in thought was he that the distance seemed covered in less time than he had imagined possible, and raising his eyes he was surprised to see the little cluster of red roofs nestling among the foliage of the chestnut trees, and which, with the church, composed the village of Massey. The house lying back from the road and showing the sign of the "Three Lilies" was a poor enough substitute for the "Star of Navarre," but, to the saddle-weary man, it at least promised rest and refreshment. As he pulled up before the low doorway some peasants, who were taking their thin wine on a bench outside, looked up slyly.

Remy Perancourt smiled grimly as he dismounted. Time was when these men would have sprung up, hat in hand, to do him service; now—well it was the turn of the people and why should they leave their wine to hold the

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bridle of a stranger who, like enough, was an aristocrat and an enemy of the glorious Revolution that was to do so much for them and theirs ?

There was little of the aristocrat showing in Perancourt, as, travel-stained and dirty, he tied his horse to a ring let into the post of the door and made his way inside the house. Jacques, the landlord—whose greatest difficulty in these times was to restrain from addressing his guests as “monsieur” and from bowing low before them—met him in the passage.

“ Er—Citizen Perancourt, is it not ? You are from Paris ? ”

“ Yes, Jacques—I beg pardon, *Citizen Jacques*. The fair land of France groans under the ‘citizen’ curse. Oh, I don’t mind ! ” as the innkeeper, putting his fingers to his lips, nodded in the direction of the drinking peasants, “ nothing seems to matter now. Our heads are sure to drop, however we act. Since the citizen patriots arrested the citizen king and as many of his citizen family as they could lay their citizen hands on, we citizen soldiers of August the 10th have been in hiding. Faugh ! ‘Citizens’—I can smell them here. Give me some of your best, landlord, to take away the taste.”

The traveller paused to drink the wine which his host poured out, then he added in a lower tone :

"The Marquis de Dartigny—is he at the château?"

"He was yesterday. You are going there, citizen?—you have news of his son? He was one of those who defended the Tuileries, was he not?" Then, as Remy nodded over his glass: "News takes long to reach here. What think you they will do with the que—with Citoyenne Capet?"

For answer Remy took up a knife from the table, and, poising it horizontally, let it fall edgewise on the board. He rose with a little laugh.

"As for the young seigneur, as one of the officers of the Petit Pères he is 'suspect.' It does not do for any of the defenders of the Tuileries to show face in Paris. You and I, landlord—we who are such staunch supporters of the Revolution—have nothing to fear." Remy solemnly winked at Jacques as he spoke and finished his wine. "I can leave my horse here, I suppose—I will likely sleep at the château."

Remy Perancourt stepped out along the uneven road, turning off into a narrower track, which, threading a little wood, led to the bridge which spanned the moat of the Château de Chauville, the conical roofs of whose towers he had seen above a clump of poplars from the door of the inn. The mansion stood mysterious

in the pale light of the newly risen moon, its white towers, ivy covered and discoloured with age, showing faithfully in the placid depths of the moat, where lily leaves made green patches on the surface and two swans seemed to hang motionless upon the water.

The man crossed the bridge and looked in at the little lodge flanked with its towers, tiny counterparts of those of the building itself. A sleepy servant took his message, and a few moments later Remy was ushered into the great dining-hall of the castle.

Dinner was over, but wine and a dish of fruit still remained upon the polished oak of the long table. A small fire had been lighted on the massive hearth, and shone upon the features of an elderly man who rose from an arm-chair as his visitor entered.

"Ah! Remy, I am glad to see you; but Gaspard's letter said to-morrow—I am afraid you will not find us ready." He smiled a little as he spoke. "You see, in these times we do not entertain much."

He turned and pulled a silken bell-rope, and, to the servant who answered his summons, made arrangements for the guest-chamber to be prepared and for a meal to be served at once. He motioned Remy into a chair facing him.

"Yes, Remy, I'm glad to see you—glad, and

perhaps a little frightened. One never knows what to expect in these days. You have left Gaspard well?"

"Quite, Monsieur le Marquis—and safe. Oh! he is a man to be proud of, he—and the work he is doing back there in Paris. He is in the thick of the fight, running with the hare and with the hounds, and ever helping the hares. Many a condemned prisoner has found himself at liberty through Gaspard's good offices, and Sanson has been cheated of many heads. He fights the tribunal with its own weapons, and some of its most influential members have gone to the guillotine on evidence gleaned or manufactured by Citizen Gabriel, as your son calls himself when with the 'hounds.' Then he is a friend of Couthon and visits Bezon, who engraves the forged passports. You can understand, sir, how it is impossible for him to come to you. Luckily, his name was published among those officers of the Petit Pères who fell on the 10th of August—in that lies his safety—so far as it is believed."

The entrance of the servant prevented further speech, and, even when the meal was cleared away, the old man sat silent. Whilst his visitor had been eating, the nobleman had taken from his pocket the letter he had received from his son the day before. He had read it through,

and now he sat, the paper hanging limply from his fingers, gazing into the flames.

Remy leant back in his chair and watched the firelight play shadow tricks upon the shapely features of his host. The heavy wooden shutters had been barred across the windows, and a candelabra of three branches shed an oasis of light over the fruit and decanters. The remote corners of the splendid room were in deep shadow, in which loomed the indistinct shapes of furniture and the dull gleam of mirrors. Portraits of dead and gone owners of the château looked down from the panelled walls as though wondering what had become of the gay revellers of their own time, and why it was that the hall of the Dartignys was so desolate. The firelight flickered upon the tarnished frames, and here and there was the cold sheen of armour.

The Marquis looked up suddenly.

"You must forgive me, Monsieur Perancourt. I was thinking," he tapped the letter with a white and tapering forefinger, "and I was wondering, too, at this. Did Gaspard tell you what he wants me to do?"

Remy Perancourt nodded.

"I understand that I am to see that you and your granddaughter reach Fécamp in safety. We of Gaspard's band obey his orders implicitly. I have arranged——"

The old aristocrat held up a protesting hand.
“Over fast, my young sir, you go over fast.
I am under no oath of obedience to my own son.
Understand me, I will not leave the Château de
Chauville.”

“But, Monsieur le Marquis, you do not
appreciate the——”

“I appreciate enough to know that I will not
be driven from my home by a pack of wolves.
Besides, my people round here love me; I have
no fear of them. They will not forget the corn
I have distributed among them in their lean
years, the rents I have refused to accept from
them. I in danger from my peasants? It is
absurd!”

Perancourt sat looking into the fire for a few
moments, then he rose and faced the Marquis
de Dartigny, into whose pale cheeks a tinge of
colour had come.

“It is hateful to me,” Remy said at last, “to
dispel illusions, but my duty is clear. You, who
have lived your life in these peaceful solitudes,
can have only a very slight idea of what is
taking place back there in Paris. It is not *your*
peasants you have to fear. When I tell you
that at this moment one of the bloodiest of the
Terrorists is sitting drinking at the ‘Star of
Navarre’ in Blois, perhaps you will allow that
Gaspard and myself are acting rightly.”

Remy paused. Perhaps he expected an answer; but the Marquis sat silent, his eyes fixed on the speaker's face.

"Perhaps, Monsieur le Marquis, the name of Herat conveys nothing to you; to us who know him it spells all that is hellish in human, or rather inhuman, nature. This man is the friend of Fouquier-Tinville; it is he who prepares the fatal lists for the daily sittings in the Maison de Justice. Your son knows the names which appear——"

"You mean that my name——"

"I mean that your enemies are active, and that they are at your very door. Do you imagine that your gifts of corn have been acceptable to all? What of the monopolists in the city of Blois, those devils who hope to make fortunes out of the famine and sufferings of the people? Believe me, the crops will be watered with blood before the people eat their fill. This is the time when the young must teach the old, when youth must——"

The door of the dining-hall flew open, there was a patter of tiny bare feet, and a small person of some four summers precipitated herself, between tears and laughter, into the arms of the old nobleman. From her grandparental sanctuary she glanced defiantly at her nurse, a sober-faced daughter of Albion who stood, hesitating, at the door.

"She is naughty, Monsieur le Marquis; she will not sleep. It is Pierre at the lodge—he tells her stories of Paris and—"

Two roseleaf hands crept up and caressed the thin cheeks of the old man, and blue eyes full of a sleepy terror looked through the masses of golden curls into his. And the Marquis de Dartigny folded the little night-clad figure in his arms and signed to the nurse.

"Leave the little maid with me, Susan; she is frightened at what the wicked Pierre tells her." He patted the little rounded shoulder. "He is a wicked one, that Pierre, Sylvia, and to-morrow I will give him to the giant who takes away the naughty people who tell stories—"

With such childish comfortings he soothed the motherless child until the small figure relaxed and the little blue-veined feet drooped like faded lilies, still and slender in the firelight.

The Marquis bent his head and pressed his lips to the shining curls, and looked up over them at the man in the chair opposite him.

"I have changed my mind, Remy. You are right when you say the young must teach the old. I fear I had forgotten the maid. In a little while I will rejoin you. Henceforth I am in your hands—and in Gaspard's."

And treading softly, the old nobleman crossed

the room, bearing the little sleeping form in his arms.

It was past midnight when Remy Perancourt was shown to his room, a small bedchamber in the eastern tower, which overlooked a plantation of forest-land showing black against the moon-bathed countryside.

The young man stood for a few moments leaning against the framework of the window, drinking in the perfumed airs of the night. The fair land of France lay sleeping, and there was no sound save the harsh croaking of some frogs in the marshy pools and a dog barking somewhere in the village. It was all so peaceful, and Remy's face grew set and hard as he thought of what was going on back there in Paris—nay, even at the very doors of the château—how man was showing man's inhumanity to man in the sacred names of Liberty and Fraternity.

With a sigh he pulled to the wooden shutters and prepared for sleep. By nightfall next day they must be on their road, and there was much remaining to be done and Remy's sleeping hours must be short. From a pocket cunningly concealed in the lining of his coat he drew out the passports. They were excellent examples of the handiwork of Bezon, the man whose skill in engraving was finding him a ready and lucrative

market for his wares. Perhaps no one in those early days of the Tribunal saved more lives than this little craftsman, who, high up in his apartment in the Faubourg, toiled night and day at his work, forging his links in the chain that led so many to safety. For all "The Incorruptible" had never seen the papers, the "Robespierre" at their foot lacked nothing of that patriot's calligraphy. Remy held them to the light of his candle and chuckled to himself at the perfection of Bezon's skill.

True, these papers did not take from his shoulders the load of responsibility for his charges. He called to mind the refined features of the Marquis de Dartigny and the flower-like beauty of little Sylvia. It might go hard with them did they fall into the hands of some of the smaller provincial tribunals, who might think it necessary to make inquiries from the Convention itself. Well did Remy know the blood-lust that was upon the "patriots," and that where a prospective victim was scented they took but few chances.

But Remy Perancourt had that at his command which was of far superior worth to mere paper. Was it not his ready wit that had rescued the aged Sieur de Cortois at the very foot of the scaffold? He it was, also, who had escorted the beautiful Duchess de Berait from Paris to St

Malo, both disguised as strolling players, and had even played the fiddle to her singing of a Republican song in the courtyard of an inn where the infamous Le Bon himself was staying ; more, he had collected a few coins from the proconsul, money which had stood them in good stead. Away over in England, in Jersey, in Hamburg, and over the Belgian frontier, were many thankful husbands and sisters who whispered in their prayers the names of Remy Perancourt and Gaspard de Dartigny.

As the young man lay in the big four-post bedstead, with its tall, twisted columns and its curtains of rich brocade, he thought of these things and thanked his God for the great opportunities which were his.

But below him, in the dining-hall, the Marquis de Dartigny still sat drooped in the arm-chair of worked embroidery before the little heap of dead and grey ashes in the fireplace. His gaze was fixed upon the escutcheon carved over the hearth and a great bitterness showed in his sunken eyes. He felt particularly helpless in the trouble which had come upon his beloved France. It is hard when one has nearly reached the allotted span, to learn how to run away, to leave behind one the home of one's ancestors—to become an outcast in a foreign land. For an hour the old nobleman sat there huddled in his chair, then with a sigh he rose to his feet.

How long Remy slept he could not tell, but he awoke suddenly. He felt that something had been the cause, and, alert on the instant, he raised himself on his elbow to listen. His life for the last year had made him a light sleeper, and had taught him to lie with his hand on his weapon.

Now everything was quiet, with that stillness which immediately precedes the dawn, the hour when the life of the world is at its lowest ebb. For a few moments Remy sat still, then, as he was about to return to his dreams, something sounded in the room below him, a noise which grated harshly on the quietude. The young soldier slid from the bed to the floor. What he had heard was for all the world like the grating of locks, rusty and seldom used, and now that his ear was attuned to his surroundings, he could make out the stealthy movements of footsteps.

Half-dressed as he was, he quietly opened the door of his room and peered out on to the dark landing. The moonlight streamed in at the long, many-paned window, and cut a mosaic of brilliance on the oak stairs and on the fantastically carved banisters. Looking down into the hall below, the young man saw that the door of the dining-room stood partly open. Carefully he descended the stairs, his stocking feet making no sound.

It was only a portion of the large room that came within his range of vision, but that portion took in the further end of the long table, where, beneath the light of a pair of candles, the Marquis de Dartigny sat writing. Before him on the table were papers, and cases, and boxes, the latter of heavy oak, massive and brass-bound. One of these stood open and, as Remy watched, the nobleman drew it towards him, lifting out tray after tray. The candle-light flashed and shimmered on the contents, and the rays were thrown back in red and violet, in green, orange, and blue.

On the table, too, stood gold and silver plate, massive escutcheoned salvers, tall, gracefully wrought cups and vases, and there were also a few pictures. And amongst all this radiant display stood an object which, perhaps by reason of its dullness, attracted the watcher's eye. It was a well-carved oaken representation of an apple; its size was about that of the natural fruit.

As he looked, it came to Remy that this eavesdropping was unworthy of him, and he withdrew to his room as silently as he had come. He was an honourable man and he would put from his mind what he had witnessed. Stories of the Dartigny treasure had often reached him, but he had paid no heed, neither believing nor disbelieving the Aladdin-like rumours.

And in the bustle and stir next day the events of the night passed from his mind. The few servants who remained were dismissed with liberal presents; only Pierre and his wife were to remain. They would live in the lodge and would tell comers that the family were travelling. They were to do their best to protect the château, but were to make their escape if danger threatened.

Sylvia and the English nurse had been sent off alone by the post-chaise travelling by easy stages to Fécamp, there to take up their quarters at the "Taverne de la Lune" and await the Marquis and Remy. The old nobleman had protested strongly against the parting, but Remy had persuaded him as to the safety of his granddaughter. Susan was to pass as an Englishwoman who had crossed to fetch away the little girl from a convent at Orléans. She had been well drilled in her part, and instructed that, when questioned, she was to show the passports and speak in broken French. She was to say hard things of the priests (which Susan, being a staunch Protestant, would not find hard). Her mistress in London, she would say, had heard of the doings in France and was removing her daughter from the evil influence of the convent. Remy well knew that this would please the "patriots," and the safety of the

woman would consist in her being alone with the child—the proconsuls and the procurers of the towns through which they must pass had learnt to suspect a party of people. As for the Marquis and himself, they must rely on their wits, and they would be able to take risks which the presence of the woman and little Sylvia would forbid.

As Remy waited in the dining-hall for the Marquis to join him, he ran over in his mind their programme. With his hands clasped lightly behind his back, he paced up and down the long room, his eyes fixed on the wall before him. Suddenly he stopped, then walked swiftly to the panelling of the wall to the right of the fireplace. The panels were large and plain, with the exception of a minute beading and a carved device at the corners. It was this latter which had caught Remy's eye, a device, conventional enough, of a cornucopia shedding its wealth of fruit. It was the carved form of an apple which brought vividly to the young man the scene of the night before. He advanced his hand to touch it when a voice came from the doorway, and turning quickly, Remy saw the Marquis—a new Marquis, looking like a provincial merchant, in a long black frock-coat of coarse fustian, black cloth breeches, stockings, and well-worn buckled shoes.

"The carriage waits, Monsieur de Perancourt," he said, smiling, and Remy, glancing from the window, saw drawn up in the courtyard a shabby, covered cart, with broken and patched harness, and filled with cases and boxes packed in straw. This was the first step in the journey to the "Taverne de la Lune" at Fécamp.

"Really, monsieur, it seems to me that the Comédie Française lost a likely recruit when Remy Perancourt took to the profession of arms."

The young man, flattered, leant back in his chair and laughed.

"Come, Monsieur le Marquis, the game's been easy. It's poor sport to make fools of these provincials, these jacks-in-office who tie a three-coloured sash round their shapeless figures and proclaim themselves the friends of the people. They can no more penetrate the curtain of their self-importance than—pah!"

The fugitives had rested since midday. They were a few leagues beyond Bolbec, and the sight of the "Croix d'Argent," which lay invitingly back from the road, had proved too attractive to the travel-worn men. The rain had poured down incessantly and pitilessly and the interminable Normandy roads had been for the last few hours rivers of mud, and at parts almost

impassable. The flat fields of the countryside lay desolate to the horizon and the stately rows of poplars loomed up, grey silhouettes, in the mist.

But the little room of the "Croix d'Argent" told nothing of the dreariness without. The light from the wood fire glinted pleasantly on the dark furniture and on the brass and china of the dresser. It was now past ten and the remains of a meal still littered the table ; on the shelf over the fireplace two candles burnt steadily in their brass stands. In the kitchen behind, the hostess could be heard humming a love-song, a song which was acting as a lullaby on the Marquis, who, comfortably seated in a corner of the settle, was blinking at the flames. A half-empty bottle of excellent port stood at Remy's elbow. The young man took it up to replenish the glasses.

Suddenly his figure straightened rigidly into an attitude of listening. The song in the kitchen had ceased, and a voice, gruff and forbidding, was raised in authority. The listener leant forward and breathed a word of caution into the ear of the Marquis. Then he again took up the bottle.

The door was thrown violently open and a man entered. He shook the rain from his sodden hat and threw it upon the table. Remy

saw that a bunch of tricoloured feathers drooped from the brim. The new-comer, bending his brows, glanced suspiciously across at the pair by the fireside as he drew off his gloves.

"A wet night, citizens."

He was a man of about forty, thin and wiry. His small stature was accentuated by the carriage of his head, which was sunk, bird-like, between his high shoulders. His eyes, large and set close to the bridge of his nose, shone fixedly from beneath his overhanging brows and gave one the impression that he was always looking up at one. A tangle of reddish hair was pushed back from a large forehead and was tied carelessly behind in a short pigtail. The face showed shrewd cunning and was deeply marked with the smallpox. Altogether, thought Remy, a most undesirable acquaintance for Monsieur the Marquis de Dartigny.

But he returned the stranger's salutation and pushed his chair back invitingly. The new-comer came forward and stretched his riding-boots out to the blaze. The moment before the man's entrance had sufficed for Remy to give the nobleman his cue, and the old man in the settle seemed to slumber.

"You must excuse the citizen here"—Remy was speaking with a strong provincial accent; "a keener judge of a bottle of port I never

knew. Come, Citizen Braille, get up to bed."

The old man looked up sheepishly, blinking at the stranger. He smiled foolishly and rose unsteadily to his legs. Remy, as he watched him, thought that the stage had lost another capable actor in the person of the master of the Château Chauville. The Marquis reached out to grasp the bottle, missed it cleverly, and clutched at the table. The younger man rose and took him by the arm. There was a little tortuous staircase opening out into the corner of the room and leading to the bedrooms, and to this harbour of refuge the old man was piloted.

When Remy returned, he threw himself into his chair with a short laugh. The stranger was standing as he had left him, before the fire, the steam rising from his rain-soaked clothes. Remy pushed the bottle over to the motionless figure.

" You will join me, citizen ? Our friend appreciates his own wares over much, I am afraid. A wine-merchant, citizen, from Limoges. We are on our way to Havre with samples for shipment—that is, if we have any samples left when we get there."

" Ah ! and you have been on the road to-day ? "

" Yes !—and you in the saddle ? "

" Since the morning, citizen. The work of the

...public needs fleet horses. You have your passports?—you are patriots?"

For answer Remy stood up and raised his glass. "To the Convention," he said, "and to those brave men who are fighting the people's battle in Paris!" And, when he had drained the glass: "Good wine, citizen, but I wish it were the blood of the Austrian woman!"

The other man smiled his approbation.

"The Austrian's blood will flow sure enough, citizen. Your sentiments do you a vast credit.—They are wanting men such as you in Paris."

"Ah! Paris. What room is there for a wine-merchant's clerk among the patriots there?"

"You would help, eh? Give me your name, citizen; I have influential friends in the Committee."

The speaker paused and took a sip at his glass.

"I wonder," he went on, eying the other shrewdly, "whether you passed on your road a party of an old man with a child—a little girl—and an English nurse? I am acting on orders received from Paris."

"They are *émigrés*?"

"Surely!"

For some moments Remy sat gazing at the dying fire, his brows knit together in thought. The Republican watched him narrowly.

"Supposing I can help you—what do I——?"

"Then there is a career awaiting you in Paris. Great events make great opportunities. You have my word on it."

"Well, citizen, my news may amount to but little. It was a league the other side of Lilleburne. We were passing a little wood of pines that lay back from the road. We had noticed a thin spiral of smoke above the trees, but had given it no thought. As we drove on, however, a woman came running from the little wood, calling to us and asking for a little milk. She was English, citizen, and said she wanted the milk for a little girl who was ill."

The man from Paris was drawing on the boots he had taken off, as Remy finished speaking. He was labouring under intense excitement, and in his eyes was the ferocious look of the animal who scents its game. His instructions had been explicit. Herat, his master, looked upon the arrest of the *ci-devant* Marquis de Dartigny as essential to his reputation and to the more important capture of the son—and those who helped him to his reward would themselves reap plentifully. So the man from Paris was drawing on his boots.

He jumped to his feet, and, snatching his hat from the table, made for the door. He did not see the smile on the face of the man by the fire.

"Come, citizen, the rain has ceased and the moon is up. Show me the road now. There is little time to lose. I may start to-night."

The two men passed out through the kitchen of the inn. The rain had indeed stopped falling, but a boisterous wind showered the drops from the trees and scattered the white petals of the apple-blossoms. The moon, mist-ringed, showed through a storm wrack of clouds as Remy took his companion by the arm and led him across the orchard to where, behind a hedge, the pale light showed the ruts and puddles of the high-road.

"I can point you the direction from that rising ground in the corner yonder. We should see the lights of Bolbec from there. You are a stranger in these parts, citizen?"

The other did not answer, and they made their way between the apple trees until they reached the corner indicated by Remy. Here a low, flat wall separated the orchard from the road.

"Allow me, citizen." The younger man held out his hand. "Step up, I will follow you—so—"

As the little man leant on Remy's arm, the latter stepped nimbly aside and, losing his balance, the man from Paris fell heavily to the ground. The next moment, Remy, his hand pressed tightly over his victim's mouth, was,

with a skill and celerity which denoted practice, binding the arms of the servant of the Republic with the tricoloured scarf he had taken from the fallen man. Then, propping the trussed figure against a tree, he sat on the wall and laughed.

"So, my little Jacquelin—that will make nine since the 10th of August—no, don't shout, it's quite useless." As he spoke, a gust of wind swept the orchard, moaning and rustling dismally through the branches. "Besides, it would only hurry matters—you would die a little earlier—that's all."

The man against the tree bent his eyes on Remy.

"You—you know my name——"

"And your reputation. I knew you as soon as you entered the room yonder. Remy de Perancourt knows most of the Public Safety men."

For a moment surprise drove the fear from Jacquelin's eyes.

"You are one of Gaspard de Dartigny's men?"

The man on the wall made a sardonic bow.

"At your service, citizen. We are a merry band, are we not? We pay in the coin we receive. 'Kill, kill!' yells the Tribunal, and 'Kill, kill!' say we. You have often wanted to

meet Gaspard, eh—he whose lieutenants strike where they find ? Why did you not call on the perfumier, Caron, at the corner of the Rue des Canettes ?—what a rich haul you would have had ! I am telling you this, Jacquelin, because secrets are safe with you for ever. To-night you go to *your* tribunal."

" You would kill me here—a bound man ? Monsieur, you are a soldier—your honour——"

Remy slid down from the wall and brought his eyes very close to those of the informer. A new note had taken the place of the banter in his voice.

" Yes, you are bound ; I would perhaps release you, but I have not the time. My brother, Armand de Perancourt, was bound when your hellish crowd delivered him to the executioner. God ! there were women in the tumbril with him that day—bound—bound—all bound ! Think you that Sanson or Outredébanque would receive their guests for the fête of Madame Guillotine if they were not rendered helpless ? No ! little citizen, ' Equality ' in all things. That is your watchword, is it not ? We of Gaspard's company are sworn to kill when and how we please, so long as no mercy is shown. Does one consider the feelings of the viper beneath the heel—the manner of killing the rat ? "

The man of the people did not take his eyes from his tormentor. On the grey face the perspiration stood out in little globules. He struggled with his bonds and made as though to cry out. But the wind took the gasping moan which fluttered from his white lips, and sported with it, and whirled it out over the fields. Remy drew a pistol from his pocket and cocked it.

He said no more after this, but sat and listened for a gust of wind of sufficient sound to deaden the coming shot. Jacqueline, divining his purpose, listened also. They could hear it away up the road, whistling through the little wood that lay on the hillside. Nearer it came, ploughing through the fantastic shapes of the fruit trees and scattering the blossoms like snow. Then it was upon them—passed and went sobbing away over the plains.

The grass at the spot in the orchard where the execution took place grew high, and a heap of straw manure stood near by. As Remy returned to the inn, the moon coming from behind a bank of cloud shone on an apple tree, peppered with petals. The trunk from which the branches spread out their twisted arms was hoary with age and patched with grey green lichen. Near the ground there was a darker patch showing with a sinister significance.

The hostess was in the kitchen when the young man pushed open the door.

"Your guest, citizeness, has decided to go on to Lilleburne. The rain has ceased and he has gone on foot. He wishes you to let the horse rest the night in the stable here and send it on to him in the morning at the 'Wolf.' "

Left alone, Remy took out his pistol and on the stock of it he cut a notch, the ninth, which shewed there; then, taking the bottle and two glasses, went, whistling, up the little staircase to rejoin the Marquis de Dartigny.

The old man was standing at the window, but he faced round when his companion entered.

"What has happened, Remy? It was you, was it not, who went out just now? There were two—only one returned."

Remy Perancourt sat down on the edge of the bed and laughed shortly.

"Yes, there were two," he said. "I left the bantam from Paris in the orchard, Monsieur le Marquis." Remy looked at the nobleman keenly. "Perhaps you do not understand the work your son and his followers have undertaken? Six of us there were who met at the perfumier's in the Rue des Canettes—there are four now. The Committee of Public Safety are not the only men in France who prepare lists; there are others whose lists are every bit as fatal. The

'patriot' who lies out there was on mine. I knew him at once; Henri Jacquelin is notorious in the Marais section; it was he who sent the Comte de Massarey and his daughter to the guillotine. She was seventeen, monsieur—and as fair as a lily."

A sob came into the young man's voice and he paused a moment, then :

"Can you wonder, Monsieur le Marquis, that we little band of men kill these reptiles when we meet them? All of us have lost relations or friends; and until we, too, follow them to the scaffold, we are sworn to kill. Oh! you have not seen what we have seen—you have not heard the prayers of maidens in the tumbril! It is not the people—the poor devils who swallow the lies of their leaders and are driven like a pack of silly sheep. They shout through fear of their masters, and, believe me, I have seen deeds of heroism among the *canaille* who surround the scaffold—have even seen a man smuggled out from among the condemned. Oh! I am anxious, monsieur, to get back to Paris and to my work. Perhaps my own time is short and there is so much to do first—so much—to do."

The Marquis laid his hand on the young man's shoulder.

"It is not for me to judge your actions, Remy, nor those of Gaspard. I can only weep for my

poor country. We move in troublous times, without hope, without faith, and I cannot judge things by the old standard. We will go to bed now, Remy ; we will start early to-morrow. Sylvia should be at Fécamp by now. God grant they have met with no mishap."

The Marquis de Dartigny slept but little that night. The wind moaned dismally around the eaves of the old building and whistled through the orchard. He thought of the man he had seen in the room downstairs, and in his imagination he saw the white face gazing up from the sodden grass, staring with unseeing eyes through the blossoms and leaves of the apple trees.

But Remy de Perancourt had no such morbid fancies. His tale would be good to relate at the next meeting in the Rue des Canettes, and he slept like a child, his hand clasped loosely round the stock of the pistol with the nine notches.

Two days after the happenings at the "Croix d'Argent" a little party could have been seen leaving the back door of the "Taverne de la Lune" at Fécamp. The little Sylvia, barely awake, lay in the arms of the old Marquis. Susan, stolid as ever, carried the rugs and the small chest which contained a portion of the wealth of the Dartignys, and which had been safer in Susan's care than that of the men.

Remy was there, too, and a small, dark man, with rings in his ears, who led them down the steep path between the gorse-covered rocks to the little silver crescent of sand.

By order of the authorities, all sailing craft had to be unrigged each night, but here, beneath a rock, a small rowing-boat lay in waiting; the oars had been buried near by in the sand, but now lay ready to hand.

The sea was steel-grey before them, its surface cut up into little waves by the wind that was blowing from the shore. The eastern sky was aglow with opal and shell-pink. Half a mile from shore, and almost hidden in the mists of the morning, a *chasse marie* rode at anchor, her three masts showing faintly.

Remy watched the little party embark, waving to them as, under the strong strokes of the oarsman, they sped towards the vessel. Then, when the mists had swallowed them up, he turned and set his face towards Paris.

PART I

THE MORTIMER TERRACE
MYSTERY



CHAPTER I

THE SHARPERS

THE front door of No. 9 Mortimer Terrace, Regent's Park, shut-to with a bang that was muffled in the fog which had descended upon the metropolis in the early morning of November 14th, 1907, and two dejected-looking men made their way down the little box-bordered path and beneath the dripping branches to the garden gate.

Their coats were buttoned tightly up over their evening dress, for the early air of a November morning is apt to strike chill to those whose night hours have been spent in the heated atmosphere of the card-room. At the end of the terrace, where it joins the outer circle of the Park, the men stopped.

"I believe he's playing the same game as we are," one of them said sourly, as he puffed angrily at his cigar, which had gone out.

The other gave a little laugh.

"Looks like it. A hundred and fifty last

night, a hundred and ten Thursday, and eighty-four to-night. If I hadn't had that 'flush' at the end it would have been a good deal more. I can't say, Eddie, that I congratulate you on your 'pigeon.' You used to be able to pick 'em out better than this."

"There's nothing like feeding your bird up before you pluck him, Vivian, and it's best to——"

"—Make sure that he isn't a crow, eh?"

The elder man shivered slightly, and, having relit his cigar, held out his hand.

"Well—it's the fortune of war, anyway. I left you here, don't I? I'll pick up a stray cao at the bend. Good night."

The younger man stood where Eddie Haverton had left him. The acute depression which he had kept in check was now settling down upon him like a black mantle, and he cursed the luck which had tempted him to take a hand in Eddie's little game. The fair-haired young fellow who was now counting his gains in the Mortimer Terrace house had seemed such an easy prey when Eddie had introduced them in the west-end bar, so willing to be fleeced. It wasn't often that Haverton made a mistake.

For all it seemed so easy, the sharpers had spread their net no less carefully than usual. In turn they had brought into play each trick

or ruse of which they had knowledge, but all to no purpose—the small, mild-faced youth always held the cards, and, after each night of play, the dawn had found him with a goodly little pile of notes and gold on the green-topped table before him. The biters had not only been bit, they had been masticated.

As Vivian Renton stood there in the damp fog, an idea entered into his active brain, a suggestion that he should return to the room he had just left and, by some plausible tale, work upon the feelings of the man whom they had been playing with. Hubert Baxenter had seemed a decent sort of fellow, and he knew him to be in no need of money. Perhaps he might consent to lend a little of the gold he had won. To Eddie Haverton, perhaps, the loss of a few hundreds meant very little, with Vivian it was everything.

No one, save himself and his creditors, knew how hard pressed he was, and that the few coins which he fingered in his pocket as he stood in indecision were all that lay between him and a debt-encumbered destitution—and Vivian Renton was not the man to be in that condition long.

The fog, moving in slow wreaths, hung round him in a heavy stillness, broken only by the sound of some cab bearing a belated reveller homewards, or the peevish chatter of an animal in the Zoological Gardens near by.

Another and more sinister idea crept into the evil brain of Vivian Renton. Why should he not return to No. 9 and tap the little fair-haired man on the head? He knew him to be alone in the house that night, and he could bind and gag him without seriously injuring him. The fog was all in his favour, and he would be out of the country before any hue and cry could be raised. He turned on his heel, and, with his chin buried in his muffler, slowly retraced his steps.

The man who had shut the door upon Eddie and Vivian returned to the card-room and, mixing himself a brandy-and-soda, the first he had tasted that night, sank into a leather arm-chair and chuckled softly as he puffed at a cigar.

The furnishing of the room showed refinement and taste. Mortimer Terrace was a row of detached stucco residences, the rooms of which strangely belied the small exterior appearance of the houses. The room in the front where the men had been playing was square and lofty, with long windows reaching nearly to the ceiling and giving on to little iron-railed balconies. Heavy red curtains hung in severe lines from brass rods and, between them, a circular convex mirror showed the gleam of the fire in the Adam

fireplace and of the candles which guttered on the baize-covered card-table. The furniture was Sheraton, the pictures few but choice, and on the mantelpiece a steel-faced clock pointed to a quarter to two.

No. 9 had been in the possession of the Baxenters for more than a century and had descended from father to son, as had the old-fashioned solicitor's offices in the Strand. The present owner of the business and the house had come into his inheritance early, and, his mother's death following so closely upon the accident to the Scotch express which had robbed him of his father, for the first time in its history No. 9 had a bachelor owner.

There were rooms on the floors above, sacred and unused, their furnishings shrouded in dust-sheets and holland coverings. They were waiting, perhaps, for a woman to come and reopen them, a woman under whose hands the house in Mortimer Terrace would again take on the mantle of home, and who would give life and brightness to the forsaken apartments. For the moment, however, the ground-floor flat, and the kitchen below, sufficed for the needs of the owner and his modest household. Hubert Baxenter was not yet thirty, and for him the world was a playground and the *wanderlust* still claimed him for its own.

He rose from his chair, and, opening the folding-doors, passed through into his bedroom. His eyes rested lovingly upon the scratched and be-labelled leather of his kit-bag, which, together with his golf-clubs and camera, stood ready for removal in a corner and spoke eloquently of holiday.

He discarded his dinner-jacket for a much-worn Norfolk, and returning to the fire, he threw away his cigar and selected a briar from the rack, then took his place again in the chair. He drew the stack of notes and gold to him, and from a drawer in the bureau at his right hand took out two similar heaps. Putting them together, he ran roughly over the total amount—three hundred and fifty pounds and fifteen shillings. He sat for some moments arranging the sovereigns and half-sovereigns symmetrically on their mats of bank-notes.

Hubert Baxenter was still smiling cynically as he took a seat at the bureau and drew towards him note-paper and envelopes. With a pair of scissors he carefully snipped off the die-sunk heading and commenced to write:—

"To the Secretary,
"Suburban Hospital,
"London, S.W."

"DEAR SIR.—I am enclosing herewith the sum of three hundred and fifty pounds in bank-

notes for the furtherance of your extension scheme. They have been won by me at cards—by means of cheating. The conditions, however, are peculiar.

"The sender (who wishes to remain anonymous) is the possessor of an adequate fortune, a somewhat small physique, a bland and trusting expression, and a sense of humour. These, individually, might not call for notice, but collectively they commend him to the observation of certain men who live upon what they are pleased to term their wits—save the mark! Two of these gentry have lately been giving him their attention, and the enclosed amount is the result.

"The experience has been a delightful one to me, and really their pitiful tricks would not have deceived a child. Why don't these people learn something fresh?"

The writer leant back and read his facetious letter with a smile of satisfaction. His favourite hobby in life had always been watching and exploiting the doings of the underworld of the great metropolis. With his insipid expression and innocent blue eyes he seemed a ready prey to the sharks ever on the look-out for victims. He loved to enter into the lists with these gentlemen, to watch with amusement their well-worn tricks, and at the right moment checkmate them. The Suburban Hospital Extension Fund

was not the first charity which had benefited by his methods.

Hubert took up the notes, changing the gold into other notes to make up the amount, enclosed them in the envelope, and sealed it. The odd fifteen shillings he put aside to give to the crossing-sweeper at the corner in the morning. Personally, he did not intend to benefit by so much as a penny piece.

"Out of evil," he quoted, "cometh—why, what's that?"

The young solicitor wheeled round in his chair as he heard the front gate open and the crunching of steps on the gravel. Then rose as a knock sounded at the door.

CHAPTER II

THE CRIME IN THE CARD-ROOM

FOR a moment after Hubert had opened the door, he peered out into the fog, not recognising the features of the man who stood on the doorstep ; then the voice located him.

"Sorry to disturb you, old man, but it's urgent. I think I've dropped a small envelope somewhere, I had it in my cigarette-case. Do you mind having a look ? I think it must have slipped out when I took my last cigarette."

The young solicitor drew back invitingly.

"I haven't noticed it," he said ; "but then I haven't looked. You know where you were sitting ; come in. You'll want another drink, too, after this fog. Sorry I can't put you up —my man's away and I'm all packed up, you know."

Together the two men entered the cheerful room, and Vivian crossed at once to the place where he had been sitting, and falling on his hands and knees, made as though to search

beneath the table. Unobserved by his host, he deftly placed a small, folded piece of paper under the chair which he had pushed back. Then he rose to his feet.

"Don't see it anywhere, Mr Baxenter; perhaps I—"

The ruse succeeded beyond the man's wildest hopes. As Hubert turned from mixing his visitor a whisky-and-soda, his eye lit upon the paper which Vivian had placed beneath the chair. Putting the tumbler on the table, he bent down.

Quick as thought, Vivian was upon him, a chloroform-pad, part of the man's stock-in-trade, which he had whipped from a little tin case in his pocket, held tightly over the solicitor's mouth and nose.

Hubert Baxenter was no weakling in spite of his slight stature, and, had the fight been a fair one, he would have given a good account of himself. Taken unawares as he was, his case was hopeless, and, in a few moments, the drug had done its work and the solicitor was lying, an inert figure, upon the white bearskin rug before the fire.

Vivian rose unsteadily to his feet and reached out for the decanter. Scoundrel as he was, he hesitated to touch the glass which his victim had prepared for him. He had no animosity against

the man lying there on the rug—in fact, he regretted that force had been necessary.

But time was short ; the money he had risked so much for must be found, and escape made from the house before daybreak. With feverish hands Vivian turned out the bureau and the drawers of a pedestal desk which stood in a recess by the fireplace. His eye passed many times over the envelope addressed to the hospital ; a safer hiding-place it would have been difficult to find.

An hour passed and the searcher, who had extended his attentions to the bedroom, came back through the folding-doors. His face plainly denoted his non-success. Then his eyes fell upon the figure on the rug, and, the Norfolk jacket with its big pockets prompting him, he fell upon his knees and slid a hand out cautiously towards—

With a cry of horror he leapt to his feet and tottered blindly to a chintz-covered Chesterfield. The fear stood out in little beads of moisture on his forehead and the grey eyes were fixed in staring terror.

“Dead !” He breathed the word hoarsely to himself, and called weakly upon his Maker.

How long he sat there he could not have told ; he must have fallen into a trance of sorts, for, when he came to himself, it was to see the first

grey of the dawn edging its way between the slats of the venetian blinds, and in its light a candle which had outlasted its fellows burnt with a cream-coloured flame. The face on the white rug stared up grey and still.

From the clock on the mantelpiece a single chime cut into the silence of the room and the man on the couch jumped up with a stifled oath. He leant across the body of his victim and saw that the hands on the steel face pointed to half-past five. The fog outside had lifted somewhat, and he told himself that he had put off his escape too long.

He shuddered at the calm horror of the room. The ticking of the clock seemed to him so loud that he felt it would be heard by people outside. The sounds seemed to call out *mur—der—tick—tack—mur—der—tick—* He crossed the room hurriedly and blew out the flame of the candle, and stood there in the grey light, trembling pitifully. He heard the tread of a policeman on his beat, and for one tense moment the light from a lantern flashed on the windows and across the ceiling.

There would be workmen about and milk-men on their early rounds. They would take notice of a figure in evening dress which was seen leaving a house at that hour, and would remember it afterwards to his undoing. He

called to mind cases in which such evidence had placed the rope round men's necks.

Besides, there was the body—he could not leave it there staring up at him. He could just make out the shapeless figure on the white square of the rug. He knew that Baxenter had intended leaving for Paris in the morning, and that he had already sent his servants away—the cook to her home, and his man to execute a commission for him in the country. After all, perhaps the body would be as safe where it was as anywhere.

But some force was working within him, telling him to hide from the coming day his ghastly handiwork. Vivian told himself that he had not meant *this*—it was not the first time he had used the chloroform-pad which he carried always in its little case in his breast-pocket. It had been his intention only to drug the solicitor, and he felt a seething resentment against the fate which had made him a murderer in spite of himself.

With noiseless steps he crossed the room and opened the door, looking out fearsomely into the dim and lofty hall. The staircase, wide and carpeted, led away up into the gloom, and, taking his courage in his hands, Vivian ascended. The stairs creaked and cracked like pistol shots through the silence.

He passed from ghostly room to ghostly room, the grey dawn giving to the shrouded furniture and chandeliers strange and unwonted shapes and gleaming weirdly in the looking-glasses. Ascending further, he found attics crowded with lumber. A window grimy with dirt led out on to the roof, and Vivian saw that here was the hiding-place he had been seeking. Among the chimney stacks, and hidden by the gables, a body might lie for ever undiscovered.

He performed the task vaguely and as though in a dream. The burden was not a heavy one, but it seemed an eternity of unreal life before Vivian leant back against a chimney stack and said that his labour was over.

The fog had lifted with the coming of the day and the sun now shone out hazily. Below him Regent's Park lay spread out like a grey-green map. From the Zoological Gardens came the roar of the awakening beasts. Two sparrows flitted noisily past him, chattering and fighting, and alighting on a near-by gable, eyed him narrowly with their beady eyes. From the street far beneath him there came the jingle of milk-cans, and someone was whistling a comic song.

Life—awakening life—in all but the motionless figure which lay beneath the shelter of a stone coping at his feet.

Vivian crawled with a shudder back through the window and so down to the card-room. The air here was chill and the fire was long past dead ashes. The man seemed to miss the figure that had been on the rug. He shivered, and had recourse to the whisky bottle again and again.

The thought that was now uppermost in his mind was that he must spend the whole day in this house of death. It was now close upon eight o'clock, and, peeping between the blinds, Vivian saw that the life of the terrace had begun in earnest. Clerks were hurrying past on their way to the Tube station, and the postman was at the house opposite talking through the area railings with a pretty servant-maid. He noticed all these things with a curious detachment.

These clerks, hurrying to their work, would be passing up till ten o'clock, and after them would come the nursemaids with the children and the ladies off to their shopping. Each and every one of them would notice the man coming from No. 9. He felt that they would all stop and stare at him. No, there was nothing for it but to wait until darkness made escape possible.

At the same time, he told himself that he was perfectly safe where he was. Hubert Baxenter was supposed to have left, and none could

suspect the tragedy which had taken place in the night.

But he must be silent, and the blinds must be left down, and he must allow himself neither fire nor light. After nightfall, the road would be clear, and in the darkness he could leave unperceived. He was glad that he had removed the thing from the rug; the long white fur was flattened down at places and he ruffled these with his foot.

For some time the man sat motionless in the silence of the darkened room. The hours passed slowly and he must have fallen asleep, for he awoke to find himself on the Chesterfield with the afternoon sun cutting bright patterns on the carpet. The clock pointed to a quarter to two. He counted on his fingers that there were five more hours at the least.

Vivian was feeling hungry, and, making his way down to the kitchen, he found a few biscuits and refreshed himself with these and a glass of water taken from the tap. As he drank, a shadow fell across the window and the tumbler all but dropped from his nerveless fingers. He stepped back carefully to the door, and, ascending to the bedroom window, peered cautiously over the blind.

Two men were at work in the garden, and Vivian watched them with a cold clutch at his

heart. Suppose they had a key to the house and were to come in! But saner judgment told him that it was hardly likely, and that they were gardeners and would use the side door. Nevertheless, their presence was an added terror to the imprisoned man. The *tick-tack* of the clock came through the folding doors. It still spelled out *mur-der*, but not loudly—only very slowly, like a long drawn out whisper.

He went back to the room facing the road, and, crossing to the bureau, casually picked up the envelope addressed to the hospital. The peculiar crackling noise given out by its contents awakened his curiosity and caused him to open it. He gave a little gasp of pleasure as he thought how useful this windfall would be in assisting him to leave the country, and again, more to pass the time than anything else, fell to examining the drawers of the desk and bureau.

There were many papers, legal and private, and a few jewels—these latter of no great value and barely worth the taking; Vivian decided to leave these as being articles easy of identification. A glance at the numbers of the bank-notes told him that they had mostly been won from Eddie and himself, and no one would ever know they had left the possession of their original owners.

It was about four o'clock when he made his great discovery.

He was putting back into its place a little drawer to the right of the pigeon-holes in the bureau when, unknowingly, he must have released some hidden spring, for another drawer, cunningly concealed in the panelling at the back, sprang out. Vivian's nervous system was already shattered by the work of the night and he fell back, his heart beating strangely, and it was some moments before he could bring himself to touch the papers which he saw exposed.

There were but two. One was evidently the last will and testament of the man who now lay dead on the roof, the other—a parchment yellow with age and creased with much usage. It was folded lengthwise and was endorsed in an angular handwriting. Vivian Renton took this over to the light which came thinly through the blinds.

At first, as he read, he showed no particular interest in the matter set forth in the cramped faded calligraphy on the parchment. It was when he had reached the second folio of the document that a look of interest came into the keen eyes. After that he read to the end without raising them.

And, when he had finished, he dropped down in the easy-chair and sat, the parchment sheets hanging down in his listless hands, his eyes fixed, unseeing, on space. From the street outside came the movement of the life of the afternoon,

the rumble of vehicles, the shrill laughter of children. The only sound within the room was the eternal ticking of the clock.

"*If I only dared—*"

The man in the chair breathed the words.

"—A fortune in it, perhaps—and a lost identity—at one stroke! *If I only dared!*"

He rose to his feet and took a blotting-pad from its place on the desk, and, choosing the spot where the window-light was strongest, placed it on his knee and began to write. Word for word he made a copy of what he had been reading—a very rough copy—partly in a short-hand of his own, for the light would not last long now and he dared not risk a candle.

The scheme, if what was nebulous, forming in his brain could be called that, dictated, above all, that the original document should be returned with the will to the secret drawer in the bureau. It was necessary that, when the heir to the dead solicitor came to take possession, they should be found intact and should show no signs of having been tampered with.

It was all but dark when Vivian put away his fountain pen, and folding what he had written, drew it in his breast-pocket, together with the top sheet of the blotting-pad. He experienced a little difficulty in replacing the drawer, but at last he told himself that all was as he had found

it and that No. 9 Mortimer Terrace showed no signs of his stay. The bank-notes were safely in his possession, and nothing remained for him but to take the first opportunity of leaving the house.

He noticed with a keen satisfaction that with the coming of night the fog had again settled down over the district, and although not so dense as before, still would serve as a curtain to cloak his departure. He buttoned his coat closely round his throat and felt his way out into the hall. He had his hand on the latch, when he started back and stood motionless with fear.

There came the creak of the gate and then footsteps on the gravel path. Vivian had, for the moment, lost all power of movement. Had the person coming up the path possessed a key, the game that Vivian was planning would have had but a short life. The steps came to a stand on the top of the flight of stone stairs that led from the door to the garden. To the man on the mat the time seemed an eternity ; his nerves were in no fit condition for this.

There was a rattle at the door, and, with a wave of relief flooding over him, Vivian could just discern a white envelope—a circular—being pushed through the letter-box. He nearly shouted with laughter as he heard the postman's steps die away down the path.

It was a small matter in itself, but Vivian Renton returned to the room he had left and drank off the remainder of the whisky. He told himself that he must pull himself together; it was not usual for him to be frightened at a shadow. But then, Vivian Renton had never killed a man before.

An hour later, the man closed the door of No. 9 Mortimer Terrace softly behind him and walked quietly out into the darkness.

CHAPTER III

THE PARCHMENT

FOR some time Vivian, having made sure that he had been unobserved, walked on, his brain teeming with the scheme which had suggested itself to him as he read the parchment. Carefully he weighed the pros and cons, oblivious to the direction in which his steps were taking him —so that they took him away from the house in Mortimer Terrace. It was only when the fog-chilled air ate its way into his very bones that he remembered that he had not had a decent meal for twenty-four hours.

Looking up, he saw that he was at the foot of Haverstock Hill. He hailed a cab that was descending the slope from Chalk Farm Station, and was driven to the boarding-house in St John's Wood where he had been living for the last few weeks. His landlady, he told himself, would not think it strange that he had not returned the night before; her patrons were for the most part men recruited from the ranks of that Bohemia in which hours appear to have no meaning, and whose goings and comings were only regular in their irregularity.

There was little likelihood of his crime being known for some considerable time, but Vivian was far too well versed in the ways of criminals to take any chances. He allowed himself time only to make a necessary change in his toilet, bundle his few belongings into a kit-bag, pay his bill, and shake the mud of the metropolis from his feet.

The fog still hung thickly over London as he made his way to Charing Cross and took his seat in a corner of a first-class smoker in the boat-train. This inclemency of the weather, together with the fact that a Dover mail-boat had been forced to put back into port the night before, after being in collision with a barque, was no doubt responsible for him having the carriage to himself. He took a paper from his pocket when the train was well under way, and commenced to read what he had copied from the parchment that was now lying hidden in the bureau-drawer in Mortimer Terrace.

"Statement of Adam Baxenter, Solicitor, of the Strand, London, pertaining to the trust of the Marquis de Dartigny of the Château Chauvile—made this 15th day of August in the year of our Lord, 1812.

"I, Adam Baxenter, having by God's grace now reached the advanced age of

82 years, and feeling that my bodily strength is waning, think it but right that I should place on record the strange circumstances which relate to the small chest which reposes in the corner of the strong room of my Strand offices.

"For, in future ages, should no one lay claim to this, a son of my house might be tempted to look into, and—which God forbid—even dispose of its contents. I have given my word to the nobleman who entrusted the chest to me that I will hold it intact and, moreover, make provision that it remain so, even after my death; that the seals shall not be broken until claimed by one who shall prove his right.

"For myself, I fear greatly that the seals will never be broken until the Great Seals of the Revelations themselves are rent asunder, and all secrets are made plain.

"It is now nearly twenty years since the Marquis de Dartigny came to my office. I can call to mind clearly the occasion. It was a misty afternoon in October, and bade fair to develop into a foggy night. In fact, link-boys were beginning to ply their calling; I could see the light of their torches from my window.

"I was about to depart for my home when a hackney-coach rumbled up to my door. I answered the summons myself (my clerks having already departed), and saw on the step a tall, aristocratic figure, which a moment later I learnt was the Marquis de Dartigny. I drew aside to allow him to enter, and I saw that he was followed in by the driver of the coach, who carried a small oak chest, about a foot square and clamped at the corners with iron.

"My visitor, having ascertained that I was at liberty to receive him, paid the driver, who mounted his box and drove off into the fog.

"I am, of course, unable here to set down the exact words which passed between the Marquis and myself. I can only tell the story in a general way, and it was a story which held me spellbound. I can see now the figure of my visitor leaning forward in his chair, his face pale, lined with sorrow and yet possessing an unbending dignity beneath his misfortunes. He was dressed simply but elegantly, and he spoke English with difficulty. It was this, no doubt, that made his story long in the telling, and candles had been lit before he left my office.

"Marie Brissac de Dartigny, sieur of Chauville-sur-Blois, was, as I suspected on first seeing him, an *émigré* from the furies of the Revolution. The storm had left him untouched, and he had remained quietly in his château, hoping for the reaction that was so long in coming. With the execution of Louis, the old aristocrat's hopes died, and rather than leave his country, he decided to await what he now saw was inevitable and to die, if need be, in the home of his ancestors.

"It was only when his son—an officer in the Petit Pères, who, after taking part in the defence of the Tuileries, was proscribed—sent, under the care of her English nurse, his little daughter, a maid of about four, to her grandfather, that the nobleman began to reconsider his decision. Still, he delayed the evil day of departure. Gaspard de Dartigny, the son, had put himself at the head of a band of desperate young men, mostly, like himself, officers in hiding, who became in their turn the terror of the Terrorists. Deputies on their way home from the sittings of the Convention, officers of the Public Safety, all came under the notice of this band of revenge. They were less merciful in their methods than the

Tribunal itself. They neither gave nor expected quarter.

"He had, at last, insisted on his father taking the little girl into safety, and had himself furnished them with forged passports, and detailed one of his band to escort them to the coast. They were fortunate in evading the revolutionaries and reaching Fécamp, where a boat was in readiness to take them over the Channel. They avoided the main ports, and were landed under cover of night at the little hamlet of Rottingdean, a few miles east of Brighton. Here they had taken a cottage, and had so far been unmolested.

"Gradually my visitor led up to the matter that had brought him to my office, having been recommended to me by a friend of his in Paris whom, however, he omitted to name. He wished to leave in my care the small chest he had brought with him. The gallant old gentleman, having heard that his son had at last been laid by the heels, had decided to return to France. The chest, which contained many valuables and the key to the hiding-place of the rest of his wealth, he did not think wise to leave in the care of a woman and a child. Personally, he had no fear for his

own safety; he had known Robespierre when the Tiger of the Revolution was a lawyer in Arras, and had on more than one occasion befriended him. He thought that he had but to intercede with the strongest and most powerful man in France to bring away his son into safety. Little did he know of the change the revolution had made in Maximillian Robespierre!

"I put the chest in my strong-room. It was to lie there until he claimed it, or, failing him, he would leave word as to its whereabouts, and he instructed that the chest should be given up, and the trust come to an end, only when anyone *giving the motto of the family* as a password should appear and lay claim to it.

"The last I saw of the poor Marquis de Dartigny was that evening when we parted at Charing Cross, I to go to my home in Regent's Park, he to return by the coach to Lewes. I can see him now as he bowed with an old-fashioned courtesy and strode off into the night, taking upon his bent shoulders the hardships of a journey and the dangers of Paris, in the hopes which I now know were vain, of saving his son.

"I had the story a year later from a client of mine, who had been in Paris during

the years 1793 and 1794. Finding himself caught in the whirl of the great upheaval, my friend stayed in the city, accumulating details with the view to writing a history when he should return to England. His credentials enabled him to see a great deal of the inner workings of the Tribunal, and he spent many days in the Maison de Justice and at the sittings of the Convention.

"It was from him that I learnt news of the Marquis and his gallant son—and a pathetic story it made. He was present when Gaspard de Dartigny and his lieutenant, de Perancourt—an officer who had served with Dumouriez—appeared before the infamous Fouquier-Tinville. The trial was a farce, and the two soldiers who had been responsible for the sudden death of so many of Tinville's friends, were as good as condemned as soon as they ascended the *gradines*. Gaspard made an heroic figure, my friend told me; he had been wounded in his capture, and his head was ringed with bandages. He laughed at his judges, and listened to the farcical formula of the law with a sneer on his lips.

"As sentence was pronounced, a commotion had taken place among the horde

of ferocious Parisians behind the barriers. An old man forced his way to the railing and called on the judges for mercy for his son. They say that for a moment the look of a great love shone on the face of the condemned man, then, seeing his father's danger, and seeking to save him, he turned on him with an oath, demanding of the judge who this drunken citizen was who dared to claim kinship with the de Dartignys, asking why he was not at home with his *children*—a remark which must have conveyed the intended message—for, before action could be taken, the mob, some of whom were kindly at heart, closed round the old man, and he made his escape. Gaspard, they say, cursed him from the *gradines*, and mounted the tumbril an hour later with a smile at the success of his ruse, at the success of a heroism that surely had no equal in that period of heroes.

"On hearing this, I made up my mind to journey to Rottingdean to search out, if possible, the remaining member of the de Dartignys, the little maid who had accompanied her grandfather into exile. I had no difficulty in hearing of them; the host of the White Horse Inn told me the tale.

The English nurse, it seems, died suddenly a week or two before Christmas, and the little girl, left friendless, had been adopted by the wife of the medical man who had been summoned, too late, to attend to the nurse. All my efforts to trace the doctor have been unavailing; it appears that he had been merely staying at Brighthelmstone for his health, and had been driving through the village at the time of the nurse's seizure. He had been seen about the neighbourhood for a week or two afterwards, then had disappeared, taking the child with him.

"The man also told me that, shortly after the New Year, the old man who had brought the child to England appeared again in the village making inquiries. He was distraught with misery and suffering, and, on hearing of the disappearance of his grandchild, his brain seemed to give way. He would speak to no one, but for weeks haunted the cliffs, pacing to and fro, muttering to himself, and shaking his fist out over the waters of the Channel. Then, in the grey light of a February morning, two fishermen came upon his body washed up on to the little stony beach.

"I can only surmise that he had lost his

reason under the weight of his sufferings, else he would have communicated with me. God rest his noble old soul !

"And now, for the past twenty years the chest has remained in my strong-room unclaimed. Somewhere in the world is that little maid. She will be a woman by this, perhaps married, and sometimes I think that some day, when I and my son—yes, and my son's son—will be dead, the mystery may come to the light.

"Until that day, I enjoin my heirs to respect the trust. The given word of Adam Baxenter is given till the end of time. (Signed) ADAM BAXENTER."

On the parchment beneath the old solicitor's signature were four endorsements, each with a note to the effect that the chest was still unclaimed. Arthur Baxenter had signed in 1815, Archibald Baxenter in 1845, Edward Baxenter in 1883, and Hubert Barr Baxenter in 1905.

The latter was evidently the signature of the man who now lay dead upon the roof of the house in Mortimer Terrace, and Vivian, as he leant back on the cushions of the carriage, wondered who would be the next to enter into possession of the Regent's Park House and the offices in the Strand. Perhaps a cousin or a brother would

come into the fat heritage, and would find the original manuscript in the secret drawer of the bureau.

Then Vivian's thoughts were interrupted by the grinding of brakes, and a moment afterwards the train drew up at Dover.

CHAPTER IV

THE BODY ON THE ROOF

"STRANGE, isn't it, Cantle, that Mr Hubert hasn't written—this is the 21st?"

The clerk who stood by Robert Baxenter's desk in the green-curtained private office gave a little cough behind the sheaf of papers he held in his hand.

"Mr Hubert, sir, likes to feel free when he goes away—*wanderlust*, I think, they call it."

"Wander-grandmother! I know all about that. But this time I can't understand it at all. That affair of the Mackinnon Trust must be decided this week, and here's a letter from Captain Freemantle, saying he is calling to-day about the mortgage on Prierly Manor. To tell the truth, I've never looked closely into that Mackinnon affair, and it's not like Mr Hubert to leave things to the junior partner in this way. It rather puts me in a hole."

Robert Baxenter paused a moment, his brows puckered in annoyance, then :

"What hotel are you sending his letters to, Cantle?"

"As usual, Mr Baxenter, the 'Maurice.' If he leaves Paris he always tells the manager where to send on to."

"Then I think it would be as well if you were to send a reply-paid wire to the manager. Just ask if Mr Baxenter arrived on the 15th, as he intended? I don't know what it is, Cantle, but I have the feeling as though something were wrong. Send the wire now, will you? We can go through the letters afterwards."

The old clerk placed his sheaf of papers on the edge of the solicitor's desk and went back to the main office.

Edward Cantle had entered the firm of Baxenter in the late sixties and was now as much part and parcel of the establishment as the brass plate on the door, the keeping bright of which had been his early care. Slightly bent, and with white hair and small side-whiskers, he looked all of the sixty-one years to which he laid claim.

The principals of the firm had time and time again thought of pensioning off the old fellow, but at the least suggestion of such a calamity, the keen brown eyes, which seemed so strangely out of place between the shaggy white brows,

would flash in defiance—and so it was more than probable that Edward Cantle would live to his last day among the fusty ledgers and japanned deed-boxes of the solicitors' office.

He took a sheaf of forms from his desk and wrote out the telegram to the hotel in Paris, then, ascertaining from Mr Robert that there was nothing among the letters to need his immediate attention, he took down his overcoat, then his silk hat from the peg beside the door, brushed it tenderly upon his sleeve, and passed out into the teeming life of the Strand. He despatched the message himself from the office at the top of Arundel Street and turned his steps again towards the Baxenter premises.

He had gone but a few steps when he pulled up sharp and turned to a little man who had touched him on the arm. The man was respectably dressed, and his keen, intelligent face showed signs of nervous excitement and strain.

“Why—Jowett——”

“Oh ! Mr Cantle, I’m so glad I met you—Mr Baxenter—Mr Hubert, I mean—is he in—can I see him—has he been here—has——?”

Cantle took the man’s arm and led him slowly down one of the quiet streets that steep down to the Embankment.

"Now, Jowett — one question at a time. What is this mystery about Mr Hubert—what do you know?

"I only know, Mr Cantle, that I was to return to meet my master at Mortimer Terrace yesterday. I went there—and again to-day. Perhaps you'll laugh at me, sir, but the house somehow looked—oh, I can't say how, only it looked deathly."

Cantle turned on him sharply.

"Don't be a fool, Jowett; how can bricks and mortar look deathly? Come, we won't worry Mr Robert yet, we'll go to Mortimer Terrace together."

The old man, without waiting for an answer, hailed a cab that was crawling up towards the Strand, and within half an hour they drew up at the residence of Mr Hubert Baxenter. Truly the house looked strangely desolate, with its shrouded windows and the accumulated litter of bills and circulars on the dusty steps.

There are some who assert that a crime brings in its wake an atmosphere of its own, and that an intangible air of tragedy pervades the scene of murder. If this is so, then No. 9 Mortimer Terrace was surely beneath some evil influence.

Even old Edward Cantle, prosaic as he was, felt it as he pushed open the little iron gate and

made his way up the gravel path. It seemed to him that he stood on the threshold of some mystery and that discoveries and happenings were in the air. He looked at Jowett and saw that the valet's face was chalky and drawn into tense lines around the mouth and eyes.

The old man gave a little cough to steady his voice.

"Have you a key, Jowett?"

"No, Mr Cantle; Mr Hubert was to have arrived at Charing Cross yesterday morning very early—about five, I think. He would come home here, and I was to meet him at nine o'clock."

The old clerk regarded the house intently, rubbing a nervous hand over his shaven chin.

"There is a window, perhaps?"

For answer the valet turned and led the way round to the back of the house, taking a little winding path half hidden by evergreens. He stopped at a square window which gave light to the kitchen—a room which, although scarcely a basement, had its floor a foot or so beneath the level of the garden.

Jowett gave a look at his companion and began to work at the hasp with his penknife. In a few minutes the sash was raised, and the

two men stood together upon the floor of the little scullery which adjoined the kitchen.

If an air of horror had been manifest on the outside of the house, it was more apparent still in the musty interior. For some reason which he would have found difficulty in explaining, Edward Cantle walked on tip-toe, crossing to where the stairs showed dimly.

It was deadly silent, and, as the men entered the dining-room, the scene of desolation and stillness was marked indeed. All was as it had been left a week ago. The cards lay scattered over the table, and a few had fallen on the carpet; the chairs seemed as though they might have just been pushed back when the players had risen from their game. The clock on the mantelpiece had stopped at twenty minutes to ten, and the air was foul with the stale odour of spirits and tobacco smoke. Over everything was a thin layer of dust.

Cantle crossed the room and pulled aside the curtains, the rings making a harsh rattle against the brass poles. He unfastened the French windows and pushed them back, and the cool morning air seemed to leap past him into the house. He stood for a moment on the little balcony, then a cry from his companion sent him hurrying back into the room.

The valet was standing at the folding-doors,

his face a mask of terror, grey and drawn. He was making movements with his throat and mouth as though he wished to speak, and he pointed with a crooked forefinger that shook pitifully to the pile of luggage in the corner of the bedroom.

"Look, Mr Cantle—I knew something had happened, I felt it—I packed those bags for him, Mr Cantle—my poor master never left London," and Jowett sank trembling on to the Chesterfield, his face buried in his hands.

The mystery of the situation was communicating itself rapidly to his companion. Cantle touched the little man on the shoulder.

"Come, Jowett," he said, "this affair is too—Mr Robert must be told. Come, don't touch a thing. This is a matter for the police."

Silently the two men locked up the windows and left the ghostly room. As they did so the old clerk stooped and picked up a small piece of folded paper. It was part of a sheet of letter-paper; the few words on the fragment were unimportant, and were evidently part of a score of some card-game. He slipped it into the pocket of his greatcoat and left the house with Jowett.

When Cantle entered Robert Baxenter's office, that gentleman was reading the telegram from

Paris which had just arrived. He was visibly excited.

"What does it all mean, Cantle—my cousin never reached the 'Maurice'?"

"I know that, Mr Robert," answered the old clerk quietly—and told his tale.

The detective sent from the "Yard" to inquire into the disappearance of Mr Hubert Baxenter was rather a heavy official, and the secret of Mortimer Terrace might never have been elucidated had not a sweep's broom at No. 8 become fixed in the kitchen chimney of that residence, a fortnight later.

The operator, ascending through the trap-door of an attic to right matters, noticed a curious shape huddled beneath the coping of the next roof. Investigating further, he found that it was the body of a man—a young man in evening dress except for a Norfolk jacket, and that the cause of death was not apparent.

And then London roused and shook itself and said nasty things about the police and Scotland Yard, and gave themselves up to the delights of this new sensation. The illustrated *Morning Press* threw itself into the matter, body and soul, and photographs ranging in interest from a picture of the late Mr Baxenter at the age of twelve, to the sweep's entire family, taken

picturesquely in a back-garden, kept public interest at fever heat until a divorce case of more than usual sporting interest pushed the crime of Mortimer Terrace into second place — and so by easy stages into its niche as another of the undiscovered mysteries of the Great City.

CHAPTER V

ALIAS BAPTISTE DARTIN

VIVIAN RENTON had, in his short but evil life, played many and varied parts, and his nefarious schemes had taken him often to the city which, being the hub of the ever-speeding Wheel of Pleasure, offers a happy hunting-ground to those who live by their wits—and by the lack of them in others.

In fact, Vivian knew Paris as he knew the palm of his hand, and his mastery of the language was no less perfect. Ordinarily, his French possessed the cultured accent that one hears spoken so much in Brussels; but, did he wish it, he could roll out the idiomatic jargon of Montmartre or the speech of the provinces with equal ease.

It was not usual for the immaculate Vivian Renton to take up his quarters anywhere but within a hundred yards of the Place de l'Opéra, and his friends would, had they known, have expressed surprise that he had this time chosen

an unpretentious resting-place in the Quartier. The Café du Dome was situated at the junction of the Boulevard Raspail with the Montparnasse, and Vivian found it both comfortable and secluded, and eminently suited to the game he had on hand. For it was a deep game and one which, for the present, he intended to play single-handed. It was hardly likely that he would meet any of his acquaintances at the Café du Dome.

It is somewhat awkward when one is engaged in changing one's outward appearance to run against even the best of friends. It calls for explanations—and Vivian did not wish to explain his presence in Paris, nor the reason that he had altered the fashion and colour of his hair, nor why he had decided that a pointed beard and waxed moustaches suited him better than a clean shaved chin and lip.

And now it would have to be a very intimate friend indeed who would see in the little dapper Frenchman who, under the name of M. Baptiste Dartin, passed a placid existence at the Café du Dome, the erstwhile Vivian Renton.

The metamorphosis from the Saxon to the Gaul had been as gradual as it had been thorough. During the time that he had been in Paris—and it was now mid-January—he had not been heard to utter a single word of English, and he had

never been seen reading an English paper. It would perhaps be useful, he told himself, in the future to feign an ignorance of his native tongue.

True, he walked each morning to the little kiosk opposite the Gare Montparnasse and purchased the Paris edition of the *Daily Mail*, but this was quickly hidden in the folds of *Le Matin* and read only in the privacy of his apartment, or perhaps on some secluded seat in the Luxembourg Gardens.

He devoured with avidity the details of the affair at Regent's Park, and he noted with satisfaction how his connection with the crime was not even hinted at. After all, he did not see how it could be otherwise unless he had left some stupid clue behind him. There was only one other man who was at the card-party at the solicitor's house—and Eddie Haverton was hardly the one, voluntarily, to place himself in the searchlight of publicity. His career was quite notorious enough without the aid of the sensational press.

It was another case in which the police were entirely at fault. London had been searched for the parties who had been playing cards with the deceased man. But no one knew of his acquaintance with Eddie and Vivian, and there was no shadow of a clue.

He thought sometimes of the scrap of paper he had placed under the chair and which he did



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not remember having picked up again. But the few words which were on it had no connection with the case, and certainly did not bear his name. A few notes he had taken on a game of cards—that was all, which could hardly be identified with him. He cursed himself, nevertheless, for his carelessness, and hoped that this faint clue had escaped detection. There was no mention of it in the papers, and Vivian told himself that, had it been found, it would have been photographed and published, in the hopes of identification.

The man in Paris had noticed the accounts getting less, and more meagre, until now, for a fortnight, with the exception of an interview with the sweep's aged mother, they had entirely ceased, and Vivian began to look into the task he had set himself.

The preliminaries, as it were, being now satisfactorily arranged and his identity sunk in that of Baptiste Dartin, he gave himself up, with the thoroughness which showed in all his doings, to the matter in hand—which was no less than to pierce the more-than-a-century-old secret of the wealth of the Dartignys.

He read greedily every line of writing he could procure from the archives relating to the history and records of the time of terror which swept France in the seventeen-nineties. His room at

the hotel was a library of books dealing with the period; and, in Wallon's records, he came across what he sought—the mention of the death of Gaspard de Dartigny. There were others of the family mentioned by Wallon who had gone to the guillotine in those fatal years of '93 and '94—Gaston in June, Pierre in August, Sophie in the same month, and Marguerite in the following January. Truly the hand of the Revolution had fallen heavily on the lords of Chauville. Vivian traced the origin and the history of the famous family and its many branches, and he put beyond all doubt that these red years had, to all intents and purposes, wiped them out root and bough.

But he decided to pay a visit of inspection to the district of Chauville. He would study also the archives in the adjacent town of Blois, giving out as an excuse that he was writing a history of the Revolution, and was studying the subject on the spot. It was necessary that he should make himself acquainted with the lie of the land round the château which he intended adopting as his ancestral home.

Still, Vivian told himself that it would be foolish to hurry matters. It would be as well for the Baxenter family to recover from one affair before another bolt was launched upon them in the shape of a claimant for the de Dartigny chest. Perhaps even the astute brain

of the reigning Baxenier might be inclined to associate the two events, and the claimant had no wish to court more inquiries than need be.

It was a bright morning in early February when M. Baptiste Dartin set out to walk the two miles which separated the little village of Massey from the ancient town of Blois.

It had snowed heavily the night before; but now the sky was blue and cloudless, and the sun shone with dazzling brilliance on the white which mantled the plains and clotted the tops of the pine trees in the forests. A thin edging of ice ringed the banks of the little marshy lakes, which, dotted here and there, reflected the glory of the morning sky. The towers and battlements of the town he had left behind him rose in graceful clusters above the snow-covered roofs. From the belfry of the church the sound of bells stole across the plain, melodious in the still air.

The traveller lunched at the comfortable inn which, together with the Château de Chauville and some half-dozen cottages, made up the village of Massey. During the meal, which he ordered to be served in the large front room, he entered into conversation with the landlord, who (the district not attracting visitors in the winter months) was glad to join M. Dartin in a bottle of the excellent claret the cellars of his inn afforded.

Yes, the castles of the country round Blois were very beautiful—was monsieur going far?—merely walked out from the town to lunch—yes—the snow had not been deep enough to make bad walking—no—ah! but monsieur should stay the night—one day—two days—a week—there was so much to see—

The stranger interrupted the flow of talk.

“I have heard and read of the Chauville estate, and I——”

The excitable little landlord of the “Three Lilies” jumped up, and, crossing to the door, pointed with many gesticulations to where two white towers with conical-shaped roofs rose above the trees.

“Monsieur is fortunate. Monsieur de Barron is away—oh no, not Dartigny—they are dead—the caretaker is a friend of mine, a fine fellow, he will show monsieur everything. You would like to go to him?”

Dartin was anxious, but diplomatic.

“Above all things—after I have had some of that delicious coffee which the good madam is preparing. It smells good, and—ah, a little drop of cognac.”

A stone bridge spanned the half-frozen surface of the moat and led to the main entrance of the château, a massive gateway flanked by little white

towers. Above it, on a block of stone, were the remains of a carved escutcheon, battered and defaced almost out of all recognition. The caretaker, who had been nodding over his fire in the little gate-room, welcomed the landlord of the "Three Lilies" and his guest effusively. To show a stranger over the great house of which he held the keys was to him a source of never-ending delight.

As he led them through the courtyard his tongue was busy recounting snatches of the romantic history of the Dartignys. The old fellow seemed to live in the glories of the past. Here, from this doorway, the Marquis and a Monsieur Perancourt took their departure, disguised as a wine-merchant and his clerk. Yes, they reached England; but the nobleman returned, and he was not seen again after the death of his son. Ah! it was a sad time, that of the Revolution.

The old caretaker shook his head sadly as he recounted the history.

"No, monsieur, there are no Dartignys left now. There was one who appeared as a claimant in the early part of 1800. He was an *émigré*, monsieur, and he had no money and could not fight his claim. He disappeared at last, monsieur, and went with two or three other ruined nobles to Ottawa, to begin life again."

The château, the visitor learnt, had been attacked by a mob of patriots led by a friend of Carrier, the infamous butcher of Nantes. This gentleman, with an eye, no doubt, to personal plunder, restrained the fury of the attackers, who, after demolishing the chapel, and the carvings and armorial bearings over the gates and fireplaces, and finding no living beings on which to gratify their blood-lust, passed on to more exciting game. The castle ultimately fell into the possession of a prominent Jacobin, who, shortly after the fall of Robespierre, followed his illustrious leader to the scaffold.

The estate after that had fallen into a state bordering on decay, until, in 1860, it was restored by a Monsieur de Barron, a financier in whose possession it now remained. The building had changed but little in style since the days of the last marquis, and the new owner had so far respected history in that he had left the battered escutcheons and restored only what was quite necessary to comfort.

The traveller from Blois was a good listener, and on his return to the "Three Lilies" he was able to fill two pages of his note-book with useful data pertaining to the ancient family of the Dartignys. The gentleman who had gone to Canada particularly interested him, and

reference to the notes which he had accumulated in Paris easily located him as the only child of a certain Yvette, sister to the Marquis. This lady, Vivian noted with satisfaction, ascended the scaffold in the Carrousel quite early in the days of the Terror.

He told himself that it was through this emigrant to the New World that his path lay to the chest reposing in the strong-room of the firm of Baxenter. For a few days he lingered in the neighbourhood of the château, then returned to Paris.

On the 20th of February the good ship *Touraine* left Havre for Montreal. On its passenger-list figured the name of Baptiste Dartin.

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CHAPTER VI

THE CLAIMANT

THE sun of mid-June beat fiercely down from a brazen sky, and striking the big, polished reflectors outside the windows, made the atmosphere in the offices of Messrs Baxenter well-nigh insupportable. At his desk in a far corner, Cantle nodded over a specification, a page of which he had not turned for the last half-hour. The second clerk, a young man whose attire showed a continual conflict between law and fashion, was marking with a pencil the finals in an evening paper, which, doubled up small, protruded from under his ledger. The office youth, whose desk faced the windows, had skilfully disarranged the wire-screen, thereby making it possible to catch ravishing glances of the little actresses tripping daintily in their high-heeled shoes and muslin draperies along the Strand to visit their agents. The Baxenter cat, doubtless from force of a long-established habit, dozed in front of the empty fire-grate. It was very peaceful, very

somnolent, and very stuffy in the domains of the firm of Baxenter.

But upon the handsome face of the young head of the house there was a look of deep intent as he paced restlessly to and fro on the carpet of the inner room. Now and again he would stop and gaze out over the green half-curtains on to the shady side street, then would turn to the letter which he carried in his hand. He had found it among his correspondence when he had returned from his lunch, and he had read with curious sensations the echoes of the long-dead past which it contained. It seemed to him that someone was writing to him across the ages, and, involuntarily, he raised his eyes to the painting by Hoppner of the founder of the firm which hung on the grey-green expanse of wall facing the windows. From it they returned to the papers on his desk, resting finally upon a portrait of a lovely girl, who from her silver frame seemed to smile upon the young solicitor.

Robert Baxenter crossed to his chair and sat there in a reverie, telling himself that it was in this very room, and sitting in this very chair, that his ancestor had listened to the romantic story of the Marquis de Dartigny. In his mind he pictured the old nobleman as he leant forward, eagerly telling of his hopes and fears, saw the

candle-light upon his face and upon the ruffles of lace at his throat, and imagined the professional air of old Adam Baxenter nodding sagely over his stock at his visitor.

As he gazed at the portrait on the wall he could almost swear that a new look had come into the painted eyes, that the old man seemed to smile down upon this descendant who was taking on the work begun so long ago. Perhaps there was something after all in the theory that spirits of the dead returned to the scenes of their earthly strivings.

Then the young man pulled himself together, and, turning to his desk, struck twice on a bell. There was a little interval—easily understood by anyone who could peep into the life of the outer office—a tap on the door, and Cantle entered.

Robert Baxenter looked up from the papers on his desk.

"Ah, Cantle," he said; "shut the door, will you?—and come right in. Pull up a chair—that's it. I am going to read you a letter which came amongst these when I was out. I want you to listen carefully and not interrupt me until I have finished."

The old man was all attention as the solicitor picked out from a litter of papers before him a sheet of thin note-paper. "It is dated," he went

on, "the 2nd of this month, and is headed 'The Dominion Hotel, Quebec.' Listen."

"DEAR MR BAXENTER,—I hardly know how to address you in this letter, which at best is but an arrow shot into the air. It relates to a tradition, very vague and nebulous, but which has survived in our family for a hundred years and more—in fact, ever since my ancestor Armand, son of Yvette de Dartigny, landed, together with other emigrant French nobles, in Ottawa in 1801. The story—I can imagine it to be nothing more—is, that should a member of the house of de Dartigny (now, alas! corrupted into Dartin) be in London, he should call upon one Baxenton, a notary in that city, using as his introduction the motto of our ill-fated house.

"Referring to a London directory, I can find no trace of a solicitor of that name, but there is, I see, a Baxenter. I venture therefore, sir, to acquaint you with the fact that, business taking me to England, I will do myself the honour of waiting upon you at eleven on the morning of the 18th inst.

"With my respects, I am, my dear sir, yours very faithfully,

"BAPTISTE DARTIN."

As the solicitor put down the letter, Cantle half rose to his feet, but sank back on to the chair as Robert Baxenter held up a silencing hand.

"There is a rough drawing," the solicitor went on, "below the signature—some heraldic device—and the motto, '*Cherchez avec l'épée.*' What do you make of it, Cantle?"

"Make of it, sir?" the old clerk's eyes were round with wonder, "only one thing, Mr Robert, that the claimant has come at last." As his master had done, Cantle raised his eyes to the portrait on the wall. "It is very strange all the same, sir—uncanny."

Robert Baxenter replaced the letter in its envelope.

"It is, Cantle; but, to me, it looks straight. You see, Mr Dartin does not even seem to know that there is a chest; you see he puts forward no definite claim—he is evidently taking a sporting chance, on some vague tradition. The i. h., why, that's to-morrow. We'll know more then. I'm going to put it out of my mind till to-morrow. Now, we'll look into that matter of the Marsden settlement. The Mackinnon affair is postponed until Mrs Mackinnon returns from Scotland."

It was a well set-up man of some thirty years of age who entered the offices punctually at eleven o'clock the next morning. He was dressed in a well-fitting suit of light grey tweed and he carried himself athletically.

His beard was neatly trimmed into a short point, and his bronzed skin and the low cut of his collar gave him the unmistakable look of a Colonial. In one hand he held a soft felt hat, the other he stretched out to the solicitor.

He greeted Mr Baxenter with a smile that had something of nervousness in it and that lent a twinkle to his rather grave eyes. In his speech was a suggestion of a Canadian accent. At the solicitor's invitation he took a chair beside the desk and beneath the seat he placed his gloves and the soft felt hat.

"Well, Mr Baxenter, here I am—a mighty hunter of wild geese—eh? I appear before you, like Ali Baba, and I say, 'Cherchez avec l'épée'—presto!"

"Meaning——?" said the solicitor, with a smile.

"Literally, I think it means 'Seek with the sword.' Yet I come to you unarmed. What it conveys beyond that I cannot guess. Nothing, eh?"

The solicitor's face was non-committal.

"I didn't say so, Mr Dartin."

"Well, well, it's no good fencing, anyway; either there is something in it or there isn't. Shall I tell you my story?"

Robert Baxenter bowed assent. The man

seated opposite him cleared his throat, and prepared for the effort of his life.

"You will have had my letter," he began, "and will know where I hail from, and what I have called on you for. I was born in Winnipeg twenty-nine years ago. My father, a simple and somewhat unambitious man, had made a little fortune and seemed very well content with his modest pleasures.

"Our family, Mr Baxenter, had been settled in Canada since the early part of 1801, when a certain Armand de Dartigny, after a vain fight to recover the estates and position lost to the family during the Revolution, shook the dust of his country from his feet, and, together with a small party of ruined nobles, set out to make a new home over seas, and swearing never to set foot again in France."

The narrator paused. He had rehearsed his tale until there was no point on which he considered he could be tripped, yet he found it difficult to keep cool under the keen eyes of his listener. He took a cigarette from his case, and having asked permission, lit it; then he went on:

"During the last century our family has suffered many vicissitudes, but in the main we have prospered. From father to son the tradition of our motto has been handed down. It is

said that the head of the de Dartigny family, a cousin of my great-grandfather, emigrated to England at the time of the Terror, and that this gentleman's son, who took an active part in the Royalist cause, on his way to the guillotine had time to whisper to a man dressed as a peasant in the crowd, that he should go to *Baxenton* in London, and that his credentials should be the motto of our house. That peasant, Mr Baxenter, was my great-grandfather, Armand, who went to Canada in 1801.

"Why he did not choose to act upon the advice, I do not know. They were times of stress, and when anyone who showed signs of gentle birth was hounded from pillar to post. I imagine, too, that he was very short of this world's goods, and I expect the party of young bloods about to start for a new land appealed to him more than the vague utterances of a man about to die. He no doubt thought it better to join them than to take what might be a fruitless journey to England.

"In later years, however, he had not forgotten, and the *Baxenton* affair was looked upon as rather a joke. A message was once sent addressed to 'Baxenton — Notary — London.' This was, I think, in the early 'forties and it elicited no response. There were no directories then, and it was I who had the idea that perhaps

a mistake had been made and that the name was Baxenter."

Mr Baptiste Dartin leant down and picked up his hat and gloves.

"That is all, Mr Baxenter. I felt I could not return to Canada without calling on you—one never knows, does one? If I have taken up your valuable time needlessly, I can but apologise."

The solicitor smiled.

"There would be no call for an apology in any case, my dear sir—also, I think you have hit the right nail on the head. Even if it were not so, it would have been worth while to listen to your story. There is so little romance nowadays in this old world of ours that we welcome anything that savours of it. May I ask you a few questions? You can answer them or not as you like."

"Certainly; anything that I can answer, you may be sure I will."

Robert Baxenter leant down and pulled out a drawer in the right hand pedestal of his desk. He took from it a few papers, which he placed upon the blotting-pad before him.

He was not looking at the man in the chair as he did this, or he would have noticed a sudden pallor blanch the tanned cheeks. The grey eyes fixed themselves with a fascination upon the

parchment endorsed in the angular writing of Adam Baxenter. In his mind's eye Vivian again saw a darkened room, the winter sunshine cutting through the drawn blinds. He again seemed to hear the *tick-tack* of the clock and to breathe the foul air of the shut-up house in Mortimer Terrace. There was a clock upon the office wall, and to Vivian's ears it took up the monotonous refrain of that other clock—*tick-tack-mur-der-tick*— And then the cool voice of the solicitor came through the maze of his reminiscences, and, with an effort, he braced himself to listen.

“—and so,” Robert Baxenter was saying, “perhaps you may have heard of the name of this ancestor of yours, whom, you think, came to London?”

“I have—it was Marie Brissac de Dartigny.”

“And can you produce any papers — any documents of family affairs ?”

His visitor had been evidently expecting that this question would be asked him sooner or later, for he answered readily :

“Ah ! there I’m afraid I have only my bare word to give you. Before I was fifteen my father joined an expedition to the Yukon. He had had heavy losses, and the tales of gold to be found in the North tempted him. He never

returned, and I was taken care of by a good woman of the village. I had a little money, and, when my protectress died, I roamed the world. I visited Australia and India, and finally drifted back to Canada, where I have built up a good little business. It is this business which has brought me to London—not this other ‘pig in a poke,’ ” he added, with a laugh.

Robert Baxenter had referred to the parchment when the old aristocrat’s name had been mentioned; now he put the papers back and sat for a moment drumming the tips of his fingers together. He reasoned rapidly. Perhaps it was unwise to part with his trust to a man without written credentials; but again, his visitor in mentioning the motto, had done all that was required. The transaction was a little loose, legally, but the solicitor was more than half anxious to see the end of the white elephant in his strong-room — and he told himself that this man was beyond all doubt the legitimate descendant of the aristocrat who had visited old Adam more than a century ago.

His mind made up, Robert rose and held out his hand.

“ I am more than satisfied, Mr Dartin. True, I would have preferred some documentary evi-

dence as to identity—just as a matter of form. I offer you my very sincerest congratulations. Please come with me."

As the solicitor crossed the room, he drew from his pocket a key-chain, and selecting a flat key from the ring, proceeded, followed by Mr Baptiste Dartin, through the clerk's office and down a flight of stone steps.

At the foot, great double doors guarded the entrance to the strong-room. Each of these, fitted with combination locks, delayed the solicitor a few moments, then he switched on the light of a couple of green-shaded bulbs and Dartin saw that they stood in what was practically a large safe. The chamber was some seven feet in height and the air was hot and heavy, and even the electric fan which the solicitor set in motion did little to dispel the odour of musty parchments and old leather bindings.

Above the men, the traffic of the Strand rumbled and rolled and the confined feeling of his surroundings acted strongly upon the already disturbed nerve-centres of the visitor. But he mastered himself with an effort and looked around him. It was difficult to keep calm, now that the scheme upon which he had worked so hard had come to fruition and he was about to receive the reward.

Ledges rose, tier upon tier, to the height of, perhaps, six feet, and ranged upon them, black Japanned deed-cases, like vaulted coffins of dead secrets, frowned down upon him. Baptiste noticed that the names painted in white block letters on their sides had among them some of the oldest and proudest in the kingdom. Along one side of the chamber, a bench had been erected at writing height, and a pad of blotting-paper, together with quill pens, an ink-well, and a round box of wafers, were placed at one end. At the other, a stack of heavy ledgers reached nearly to the roof.

The solicitor had bent down in the far corner, and was dragging from its obscurity beneath the bottom ledge a small wooden chest. It was a plain affair, bound strongly with iron corner-clamps, and on the lid a rough device of the de Dartigny's arms had been branded with a hot iron. Dartin pointed this out and at the same time held out his hand and showed a signet ring bearing the same device on his finger—a stone that Vivian Renton had had engraved in Paris and set in a circlet of dull gold of antique workmanship. Had Robert Baxenter felt any doubts of his visitor's *bona fides*, it would have needed but this to dispel them.

A few formalities over, and the bold signature of Baptiste Dartin was put to the receipt

which the solicitor then and there prepared—a document setting forth briefly the history of the trust and the manner of its claiming. The signet ring was pressed into red wax at its foot, and the men ascended to the offices above.

To Robert's disappointment, the new owner of the chest did not suggest opening it at once. Instead, the clerk and the boy were requested to put it carefully into a cab, and, with an arrangement to dine with the solicitor the next night to hear the result of the inheritance, Mr Vivian Renton, *alias* Baptiste Dartin, drove off to take his place in the ranks of the ancient nobility of France.

Left to himself, Robert Baxenter placed the documents of the case together in an envelope, endorsed it, and gave it into Cantle's keeping. With a smile, he crossed the room and made an elaborate bow to the picture of Adam Baxenter. Then his eyes rested upon the girl's photograph on his desk, and he looked hurriedly at his watch.

CHAPTER VII

STELLA

ON the evening of the day when Baptiste Dartin drove away from the offices in the Strand, Robert Baxenter was sitting taking tea in a well-appointed flat situated not a hundred miles from Maida Vale. He was sunk comfortably amongst the cushions in a wicker-chair beside the open window, looking out upon a railed-in square of lawns and paths in which some children were at play. Their voices rose shrill in the evening air, with the abandon of little ones who know that bedtime is near and that the best must be made of the flying moments. At the other side of the window a small, middle-aged lady, delicately pretty, was crocheting lace, and a black kitten dabbed hopefully at the ball of cotton at her feet.

"I didn't know Stella had a rehearsal to-day."

As he spoke, Robert stole a glance up at an oval frame which hung on the wall between the

two windows. It contained the portrait of a girl, young and adorable. A determined little face it was, squarely built, with a chin that spoke of a will-power strangely at variance with the roguish eyes that laughed out from beneath the level brows.

"—And so, of course, Stella—" the little lady was speaking, and the man came back to earth with a start.

"I'm sorry, Mrs Benham, I didn't hear what you said—I was watching the children," he lied. "The little one with the plaid sash has lost her nurse. You were saying——?"

Mrs Benham rescued her ball of cotton from the kitten and placed it beside her on the table.

"I was saying, Robert, that Miss Foster was taken ill very suddenly, and Stella has to play her part till the end of the run. I thought she telephoned to you. Perhaps she forgot; she is very excited, and there is so much to learn in——"

There came the rattle of a key in the outer lock, and the drawing-room door was burst open and a whirlwind entered — a storm of muslin and flowers and smiles.

"Oh, mummy, it went splendidly! Old Mosenthal says—why, Bobby, I expected you to meet me. Oh, I forgot, I couldn't get on

to your number. I'm crazy, Bobby, crazy with happiness!"

Robert had risen and was leading the radiant girl to the chair he had vacated. She threw herself into it and fanned herself with her long gloves. Mrs Benham was handing the kettle to the trim maid who had followed her young mistress into the room.

"And so you have got your chance, Stella?" An observant man might have noticed a lack of enthusiasm in Robert's voice.

"No, Bobby. I've got the chance of a chance. If all goes well to-night, I'm made, Bobby, *made*. The world will—why, what's wrong?"

The young man was leaning forward and looking up into the lovely grey eyes.

"I'm glad, Stella, that you are so happy, but——"

"You're thinking of my promise—my answer, Bobby?"

"Morning, noon, and night, dear. You see I wouldn't like you just to taste the delights of power, to inhale the incense of applause. You might not feel inclined to leave it all—for me?"

The girl turned and looked out over the gardens. She took hold of the cool muslin curtain and pressed it against her hot cheeks.

"Don't you think so too, Stella?"

"Oh, Bobby, you know I think the world of you—you know I do. But my art, I lo—like that too. Life is such a little thing, isn't it?—and I do want to cram so much into it, and squeeze so much out of it. Why can't I give you my answer—and act as well?"

Robert took the slim little hands between his own.

"Because, darling, in my business I have seen so much, straightened out so many matrimonial creases. The stage plays a part in a lot of marriages nowadays; they begin in showers of roses and end in—. No, Stella, a woman should find her applause in the look of her husband, in the love-light in the eyes of her children; she should have no other life but that—they should be all that matters. What should you care—what *do* you care—for the strangers who gape at you and clap their silly hands together—why should you please them?"

Stella Benham rose suddenly. Her head was again turned to the gardens, and a flush had spread over her white neck and rebellion clouded the grey eyes.

"Now you're lecturing me, Robert; I won't stand it to-day of all days. I'm going to cry in a minute—and—and—I think you're horrid—"

It was all said in a breath, there was a swish of skirts, and Robert Baxenter was alone.

He remained where he was, gazing moodily out over the gardens. It was now all but dark, and the last of the tiny revellers were being escorted homewards by their nurses. The block of flats facing him across the trees was a silhouette of purple shadow, in which little squares of soft radiance were twinkling out one by one. How long he sat there he did not know, but he was aroused from his reverie by a taxi drawing up at the door below him. It waited a moment, its engines throbbing, then swung across the road, backed, and, with a warning note on the hooter, made off quickly in the direction of London.

Robert turned to find Mrs Benham standing by his chair.

"What is wrong, Robert, between you and Stella? She has gone off to the theatre alone—and she has been crying—she said you would understand."

"Oh, yes, I think I understand—that is, as far as women were meant to be understood. Good night, Mrs Benham; I've barely time to dress if I want to see Stella in the glory of her new part. Won't you come too, for once?"

The little lady shook her head.

"My nerves, Robert. Suppose she failed. I really think I would get up and abuse the audience. The time will not pass so quickly here—but it will be more peaceful."

Robert walked part of the way to his rooms. He felt a little angry with himself at upsetting the girl on the day of her appearance. He hated the stage and all connected with it, but he wished now that he had hidden his own thoughts—at any rate until Stella had made her appearance in Ruby Foster's part.

By half-past nine the young solicitor was in a stall at the "Odeon," watching rather sadly the person of Stella Benham, who, attired in the picturesque rags of a beggar girl, was fascinating the impossible hero of the particular musical comedy which was casting the spell of a moment over the metropolis. Robert's hands clenched hard upon the velvet arm of his stall as he watched.

The scene in the hands of Ruby Foster had seemed to him inane and had never had any meaning, but now that the girl he loved was a principal in it, it took on a new significance. He called to mind the evil reputation of the ladies' idol who was now on the stage with Stella, his dissolute associations and habits, and his club-talk of women. It seemed to the man sitting in the stalls as though every word

D'Arcy Epgrave uttered, every gesture, was an insult. He felt curiously impotent sitting there among the well-dressed audience. He gazed at the inane faces around him, from the bored smiles of the stalls to the eager, vacant expressions in the pit. How he loathed them all.

A titter went up from the house and the solicitor turned his eyes again to the stage. The hero, with a leer that wrinkled up his full cheeks, had slipped an arm round Stella's waist and had kissed her—not on the cheek, but full on the lips.

The lips.

With a muttered oath, Robert rose from his seat and made his way out into the foyer of the theatre. He was beside himself with passion and self-loathing that he should have placed himself in such a degrading position. He took his hat from the cloak-room and walked quickly from the theatre. On through the West-End streets, with their crowd of pleasure-seekers, through the quieter ways of Mayfair, and so into the Park. It was better here, in this oasis of silence.

How he hated the heat and glamour of the mimic world of the theatre, its tinsel and its paint. He wanted to take Stella—his Stella—away from it all, away from the

cities to watch together the sun set over the downs, and to walk with her in cool woods at evening.

He felt that he could not return to meet her at the theatre. To-night of all nights he could not stand at the little shabby stage-door among the loafers who would be there to see *her* come out. He knew that Mrs Benham always drove down in the hired brougham to meet her daughter—and Stella would understand his absence.

It was late when Robert reached his rooms. The Baxenter house had been given up, and the new head of the firm found the little bachelor flat in Craven Street more to his taste than the gloomy ghost-ridden house at Regent's Park.

He had taken on his late cousin's man, and he found him now awaiting his return.

Jowett took his master's hat and coat, and placed the decanters and syphon ready to hand.

"There's nothing more, Jowett, to-night—when did this come?" Robert took up as he spoke an envelope that had been propped up against the clock on the mantelpiece.

"Half an hour ago, sir; the attendant from the theatre brought it round, sir."

And, when the man had retired, the solicitor

slit open the envelope and read the hastily scrawled note.

"DEAR ROBERT,—I saw you this evening—and you have really offended me at last. It was bad enough for me to put up with your absurd prejudice to the stage when we were alone, but your behaviour in leaving the theatre during my best scene was too bad. I did not think you would carry your idiocy to the length of a public protest.

"I know that I promised to answer your question this month, but I can't do so now. I want to go on with my art. Perhaps in a year, if you care to wait, I will answer you.

"Come and see me, won't you? I would like to see your serious old face when you read the papers to-morrow—I had three calls and such a lovely bouquet, a great mass of orchids and carnations. Yes, come and see me, but no lectures, please, and not a word of—you know what. I'm going to have a year of freedom.
—Yours,

STELLA BENHAM.

"P.S.—I gave the bouquet to the little man who plays the second fiddle in our orchestra. He is taking it home to his wife—she's been ill for months, and has got four little children. He was so pleased with it—but he cried when he thanked me.

S. B."

Robert's first thought, as he folded the letter carefully and put it away in his bureau, was

that a few words with the headstrong girl would put things right, and that his action in leaving the theatre would have had, at least, the effect of bringing matters to a head. On consideration, however, it seemed better that he should take Stella at her word and give her her year of freedom. After all, she was only nineteen, and the solicitor felt certain that twelve months of stage life would be more than sufficient to play his game for him.

Than he, few knew better the shallow life enacted behind the scenes, the jealousies, the heart-burnings, and the continual effort to preserve one's self-esteem. He could not imagine his Stella among it all, seriously ; it was well enough to play at being an actress, but, now a success of sorts had come to her and would bring in its train all its attendant evils, envy would quickly rob Stella Benham of the friends she had made.

Robert called at Bellingham Mansions the next afternoon at his usual hour and accepted what he mockingly referred to as "the inevitable." Stella had hardly expected, nor had she desired, this unconditional capitulation, and it robbed her position of much of its sweetness. She had chatted gaily as she poured out his tea, and had been quite as charming as

hitherto ; she still addressed him as Bobby, but the question, the answer to which Robert had been awaiting, was a topic which, whatever was passing in their minds, was spoken of by neither.

And then for two weeks the young man absented himself. The work at the Strand office was heavy, and Robert was making way through it in anticipation of his annual holiday. A week before Stella's letter he had refused a very tempting invitation of a club acquaintance to join him on his yacht. This he now regretted, and a letter to young Archie Wendover elicited the welcome news that his cabin on the *Gazeka* was still waiting his occupation. In fact it was nearly three weeks before he called at the flat to say good-bye, although he had written pretty frequently.

He found Mrs Benham alone. Stella, she told him, was at rehearsal—she had the name-part in a company that was going on tour immediately—a No. 1 Company ; oh, yes, she had left the "Odeon." It was really quite unbearable for her after Miss Foster had taken up her part again—of course, it was unfortunate that Mr Mosenthal was away—the girls were all so jealous that—. The old lady had rambled on, and Robert half-turned his back so that she should not see that he was smiling. So,

he thought, Stella was learning her lesson already.

The girl, herself, came in as he was leaving. She was hot and tired and a little disagreeable. She had had rather a stormy scene with the stage-manager, an ill-bred young man who resented "the chief's" introduction of raw talent over the heads of the tried members of his company. It had needed Mr Haverton's personal intervention to smooth out the ruffles, and, after all, the quarrel was only patched up.

Stella told Bobby all about it as she waited for some fresh tea to be brought in. She had not intended to talk, but there was a friendliness about the square face and grey eyes of Robert Baxenter which asked for confidence. The hearer, however, was not very sympathetic as he listened to the angry girl's description of the stage-manager.

"There are a lot like him," he said. "I shouldn't wonder if the leading lady you have supplanted is a member of his family—his sister, his——"

"Mother, I should say," said the girl, as she bit her strong little teeth into a crisp piece of toast.

Robert smiled unperceived.

"Oh, hardly that, Stella—the stage hasn't

much use for people who have grown-up sons. It's a short life—some say that it is a merry one."

Stella's eyes flashed defiance.

"So it is, Bobby—a splendid life."

There was a moment's silence; then Robert took up his hat and held out his hand to the girl.

"I was just going, Stella; I'm glad you came in. I was going round to the theatre, if I hadn't heard the news from your mother that you had left the 'Odeon.' I—I'm joining Archie in that trip to the Mediterranean. I don't expect I will be back before the end of September."

"Oh." The tone was non-committal.

"You'll write, Stella, won't you?" Robert was sorry that what he had said had hurt the girl, but sharp medicine was necessary. "They'll forward on from the office. I—I'll keep a track of you by the *Era*." He held out his hand. "Good-bye, Stella—and, if ever you want—oh, hang it all! I'm your pal, Stella, always your pal."

She jumped up and went to the window as he hurried down the stairs. She felt she would have given her ambitions, her life, to feel his lips on hers, to bury her nose in his shoulder and cry—just cry. She watched his broad

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shoulders as he crossed the gardens, and when at last he was out of sight, she turned and, brushing hastily past her mother, flew to her bedroom.

And Mrs Benham gathered up her scattered crochet-work, and gave a little fluttering sigh, and wondered if she had been like that when she was young.

CHAPTER VIII

THE SECRET OF THE DARTIGNYS

THE same motives which had been responsible for Vivian Renton's residence in the café in the Latin Quartier now seemed to cause Baptiste Dartin to fix upon a secluded boarding-house in Camden Town as his London abode. The accommodation was not at all to his extravagant tastes, but it was only temporary — and in Mornington Street he felt at least safe from any unwelcome recognition from his late friends.

It was to a room on the first floor that he carried the ancestral chest of the Dartignys. It looked curiously out of place there upon the faded flowered cloth of the crazy table. The boldly branded escutcheon, the time-blackened wood, with its heavy, rusted hinges and clampings, suggested with a silent eloquence a dignity strangely out of place among the tawdry furnishings of the room.

Dynasties had risen and fallen, wars and

famines had ravaged France, and through it all the chest of the Dartignys had lain, hidden from the very light of day, in the musty cellars beneath the Strand. Above its head the life of a century had played its part, the tramp of crowds acclaiming Waterloo had shaken its very dust. Monarchs had been crowned, had reigned, and been gathered to their rest. And through it all the secret of the Château Chauville had slept.

Vivian was not dead to the sense of romance, and these thoughts passed through his mind as, after trying in vain to fit any of the keys on his ring to the lock, he stood hesitatingly, a heavy poker he had picked up from the fireplace in his hand. The pause was but momentary, and the man laughed at himself for his fancies.

With his penknife he whittled away at the wood beside one of the hinges, and, inserting the point of the poker, he used it as a lever. The oak was stout and the workmanship good ; but perseverance won the battle, and, with a creak of protest, the wood splintered and yielded up its secret.

A little cloud of dust rose as Vivian wrenched off the lid, and, when this had settled, a curious sight met his eyes. A few pieces of gold and silver plate, richly chased and of exquisite work-

manship, gleamed through wrappings of decayed and threadbare cloth. There were cases of worm-eaten leather, too, containing quaint old brooches and necklaces, rings and bracelets—valuable enough, but dulled with age, as though the stones had despaired of ever seeing daylight again. The man who now regarded them felt a distinct disappointment creeping over him, as, one by one, he lifted out the treasures.

After all, a certain gentleman whom he knew in Aldgate would give him, perhaps, a thousand pounds for the collection as it stood—"fences" are not generous where ancient jewel settings are concerned, and the melting-pot is no respecter of escutcheons and monograms and curious workmanship. Why, it had cost him the five hundred he had taken from Mortimer Terrace to prepare for this coup, apart from the —yes, it was distinctly disappointing!

He sat down in an old horsehair arm-chair and lit a pipe. It was a peculiar sight, the dull gleam of the vessels on the old tablecloth with the background of tawdry wall-paper and cheap oleographs. One of these, a portrait of the late Queen Victoria, seemed to be regarding the scene with marked disapproval. Dartin wondered what Mrs Bates, his landlady, would think if she were to come up.

He broke off in his thoughts as his eye fell

upon a small square of parchment partly hidden beneath one of the leather cases. He had not noticed it before and he took it up with interest. It was tied by a faded thin red ribbon to a large, heavy key of intricate workmanship. Vivian translated the words on it in wonderment :

"Key to the hidden closet in Château Chauville, fitting the keyhole behind the apple in the right-hand panel on the south wall of the dining-hall."

Vivian sat for some minutes deep in thought. The words on the scrap of parchment were amazingly vague, and he asked himself whether he had not already spent too much time and money on the affairs of the de Dartignys. Better to see old Moseburg at once, clear the matter up, and turn to other and more profitable game.

But there was Eddie—the one man who knew. Vivian's past associates were barred to him by the happenings at No. 9 Mortimer Terrace. It would never do to tread upon the tail of that sleeping crime. By taking on this affair he had burnt his boats and— He jumped up with an oath and brought his fist down on the table, jingling the costly litter spread upon it.

"No, I'll see it through—to the very end.

I'll realise on some of these jewels and put the others in a safe deposit. Luckily, I know the old château; I can at least test the truth of this matter of the keyhole."

He had been shown over the place once, and no doubt the old caretaker would be willing to show him over again.

He packed the valuable objects away in one of his portmanteaus, keeping back only a chain and locket and a small string of pearls. This latter he pledged with Attenborough the same afternoon, the price lent upon it being such as to cause the spirits of Vivian Renton to rise considerably.

That evening, as Monsieur Baptiste Dartin, in company with Robert Baxenter, sauntered among the promenaders in the "Empire," he laughingly told the story of his fortunes. He made very light of the whole affair.

"About a thousand pounds' worth, I should say, Mr Baxenter; nice old monogram stuff—rather too swanky for us Colonials, I'm afraid. By-the-by, I brought this for you—a sort of memento," and Vivian took from his pocket the locket and chain. "Rather quaint, eh? I expect there is some lady somewhere who——"

He had spoken facetiously, but there was a

look in the young solicitor's eyes which caused the speaker to break off rather abruptly.

"Well, it'll be a memento of a romantic occasion, anyway. Come, the ballet's beginning. I don't want to miss any of it. It's all new to me, you know."

Robert Baxenter, murmuring his thanks, dropped the locket into his vest-pocket and followed M. Dartin back to the stalls. Neither seemed anxious to return to the subject of the treasure of the Dartignys.

CHAPTER IX

THE CARVED APPLE

THERE is a little arbour adjoining the inn of the "Three Lilies," a sheltered, vine-clad retreat from which the fair land of France spreads itself out, a radiant picture, in the summer sunshine—and fully appreciative of all this beauty was the man who sat before an easel within its pleasant shade one August afternoon.

Baptiste Dartin had no great knowledge of the art of painting, but he was gifted with a superficial skill in colour which a student of less virile brain might have studied years to acquire and never succeeded. He had been in Massey three weeks, and the small population were beginning to like this stranger from Paris who depicted—and made them presents of—such delightful little paintings of their countryside.

Monsieur Paul de Barron, the present owner of the property of Chauville, was in residence at the château, and Henri, the caretaker, who

well remembered Vivian's last visit, had less time on his hands than formerly. He was able, however, to slip up to the "Lilies" of an afternoon, where, cigarette in mouth, he would watch the deft brushwork of his agreeable acquaintance. Vivian had given him a slight sketch of the château towers showing above the trees, and the old fellow, to whom Chauville and all pertaining to it were as sacred things, had become the painter's very slave for it.

Henri, seated beside him this summer afternoon, watched the artist in a lazy content. Beside him were a box of cigarettes and a bottle of claret. The sun beat down through the vines clustering overhead and scattered little golden discs of radiance upon the boarded floor. A bee droned musically over the flowers in the garden. Framed between the supports of the trellis-work, cornfields and vineyards shimmered in the heat ; afar off the hills, patched with forest lands, spoke of breeze and shadow.

Vivian, skilfully touching in the purple shade beneath a clump of poplars, was speaking carelessly. He did not take his eyes from his sketching-block.

"I'm glad you like the little drawing, Henri. I'm no artist, but——"

"Ah ! monsieur—it is the château I love, not

the art—that is—I mean,” Henri stammered over his *faux pas*, “it is very beautifully done, Monsieur Dartin.”

For a moment Vivian painted on without speaking, then :

“I’m better at interiors, Henri—dim old rooms, and all that. Look at that old panelling in the château, for instance—what a charming picture, Henri ; I’ll do it for you, if you like, when Monsieur de Barron goes away—next month, didn’t you say ?”

And Henri, who had no wish that the treasures under his care should blush unseen, rose to the bait with avidity—monsieur was too kind—he would have it framed like the other and they would go one on either side of his bed.

And so it was that on an afternoon when the September sun made glorious the old carvings of the Chauville dining-room, Monsieur Baptiste Dartin stood for the second time in the ancestral home of the Dartignys. He had entered warily, even to the extent of looking anywhere save at the panelling by the fireplace. He remarked, instead, to old Henri, on the carved ceiling, the windows in which the de Barron escutcheon had replaced that of the Dartignys. It was the caretaker himself who drew attention to the fireplace and to the defaced coat of arms in the stonework. Here the new resident, who was

no Philistine, had respected history, and this broken and defaced shield of the Dartignys now remained to remind one of the days of the Revolution.

It was old Henri, too, who suggested the subject of the sketch, the angle to the right of the great stone hearth, with its rich colouring of oak and the little grouping of dim family portraits. There was a beam of sunlight that came athwart the room, and Vivian could hardly repress a start as he saw that this rested upon an exquisite carving of a cornucopia, and in the fruit that was tumbling from it, an apple showed prominently.

He chose a position by the table, facing the fruit he was so eager to examine. Surely never, since the historic apple of Eden, had fruit such a fascination for a man. The painter could hardly hide his irritation when he saw that old Henri, taking a seat near him, produced his cigarettes and settled down to enjoy the painting.

For an hour or two work went on steadily and silently, then the caretaker rose and stretched his limbs. He had work that he must attend to —perhaps monsieur would come back and finish the sketch. In the mind of the old servant no shadow of suspicion had place, but there was an unformed idea at the back of his head that it was

hardly right to leave him there alone, but—he was such a gentleman, and if he offended him he would stand little chance of possessing the picture that was progressing so well in the artist's sketch-book.

"Only another half-hour, Henri; the light of this setting sun is splendid—look at that golden ray on that old soldier's coat in the portrait—I can let myself out if I don't see you."

And it was said in such simplicity that the caretaker, entirely disarmed, hesitated no longer.

The door of the dining-room closed behind him, and the artist, waiting a moment, rose warily and tip-toed to the windows. He could make out the bent figure of the old man crossing the gardens, and watched him until he disappeared into one of the farm buildings which showed across a meadow of parched grass that was separated from the gardens by a graceful line of poplars.

It was some moments before Vivian's strong fingers could make any impression on the carved apple—moments when he told himself that, after all, he had been chasing a shadow. Then, suddenly, a little creak, and he imagined that the wood beneath his hand moved; beads of moisture pricked out on his forehead as he verified

this, then the top of the apple unscrewed gratingly and came away in his hand. He gave a little cry of relief.

Hastily whipping open his shirt, he drew out the key which he had found in the chest, and which he had suspended round his neck by a ribbon. He was not surprised that it fitted the keyhole that came to light behind the carving—nothing would surprise him now—and he told himself that he had succeeded and that he was on the threshold of wondrous things. A hasty glance at the window showed him the old man still at work in and out of the barns across the meadow.

Vivian carefully oiled the wards of the key from a tiny oil-can he took from his paint-box, and, after a few attempts, the heavy key turned—grated—there was a rumble of locks. The man stared in wonderment—nothing had happened.

Then his eyes travelled to the fireplace. The large slab that comprised the back of the deep grate had rolled aside, displaying a cavity through which he could, with stooping, crawl. It seemed to yawn invitingly.

He thought rapidly, and decided that what was to be done had better be done at once. It would take old Henri at least ten minutes to return, even if he started back at that moment, and

Vivian could see that the old man had settled down to his wood-chopping and was hardly likely to leave the job he had put off to watch the sketching.

Vivian tip-toed across the hearth, and, bending nearly double, passed through the aperture.

A circular chamber, choked with the accumulated dust of ages, perhaps ten feet in diameter and with stone walls which narrowed up, meeting in a small dome about a dozen feet above his head. Vivian told himself that he was in one of the round towers which formed the corners of the château. The air was hardly breathable, and it was so cold after the sunshine of the room that Vivian shivered slightly.

He came out again almost immediately into the dining-room and passed out through the French windows into the garden. He called to Henri and waved a farewell, then turned the corner of the tower. There he waited out of sight, watching until the old man-servant entered one of the barns, when Vivian returned to the dining-room unperceived. He screwed the apple again into its place and slipped back to the little chamber. There would be nothing now to make Henri return to the château, imagining, as he would, that the painter had gone, and Vivian could work in peace.

In his varied career many jewels had passed

through the hands of Vivian Renton but never such priceless gems as these which he was unearthing from their hiding-places every minute. Diamonds of a size which pointed to their being historical, pearls matched into strings, emeralds and rubies which threw out their hidden glories to meet the rays of Vivian's tiny electric torch, as though overjoyed at their release. There were vessels, too, of gold and silver, richly carved and curiously designed, counterparts of those he had found in the chest, jewelled rosaries and devotional objects of the richest workmanship. Pictures, too, the value of which Vivian could only guess at, were stacked against the walls, and books and jewel-encrusted daggers were heaped together with other objects in heaps which glittered dully under the thick layer of dust which covered everything like a pall.

Vivian sat on an old oaken chest, spellbound. Here were riches that would make Monte Cristo blush in envy. With this wealth at his disposal the freedom of the world was his, friendships, pleasures, titles, were at his bidding. The man could hardly believe that within a few feet of him the sun was setting over a fair garden in which an unsuspecting old man was chopping wood, and that even in this little chamber he was still in the twentieth century.

How long he sat there he could not tell, and it was the sight of a grating in the stone floor which called Vivian down from the airy turrets of his imagination. This grating was, perhaps, some twenty inches square, and as the man bent down and threw the rays of his pocket electric torch upon it, he could make out, beyond the rusty bars, the shadowy form of the topmost step of a flight that led down into obscurity. He took a franc-piece from his pocket, and dropped it through the iron network and listened. From the reverberations before the coin came to rest the man judged the well-like opening to be of some considerable depth.

Vivian seized one of the bars, and, leaning back, exerted all his strength. For a moment the cement held, then, with a sudden rending, came away, and the man was thrown violently backwards. He staggered in a vain attempt to gain his balance, then, as he fell, his elbow came in sharp contact with the sliding door of the entrance. Vivian all but cried out at the pain, and, too late, he saw the solid mass of masonry and iron, set in motion, doubtless, by his fall, swing back into place. There was a dull clang as it stopped.

Even then it did not occur to Vivian that he was a prisoner, and it was only after a fruitless

search that he came to the conclusion that his treasure-house bid fair to become a tomb. As the significance of this came home to him, little beads of cold perspiration broke out over his body and he tottered weakly to one of the iron-clamped chests.

It seemed to him that he had succeeded only to fail, that there was nothing for it but to attract the attention of old Henri. Even then it might be impossible for the old man to release him without the key, which Vivian felt pressing cold against his breast.

He thought that, even if he escaped the hideous death which faced him, he would lose the riches he had risked so much to gain. He imagined himself dying by inches, ravaged by hunger and thirst, and mocked by the gleaming jewels around him. For a few moments despair seized the soul of Vivian Renton and he sat dazed, his head buried in his hands.

It was not long before the reaction came. There was time before him, and the grating promised more than a ray of hope. Fortunately, the sketch in the dining-room was unfinished, and old Henri would see nothing suspicious in the paint-box and book left open awaiting its completion, taking it for granted that the painter would return the next day.

The prisoner did not wait to ask himself what

he would find at the foot of the dark stairs behind the iron bars. It had ever been his motto that troubles anticipated were twice borne, and that bridges were made to be crossed as one came to them—not before. He found his work easier now that he had the leverage of the loose bar to assist him. In half an hour Vivian was ready to descend. It was part of the man's character that he should take the pick of the stones before he left the chamber. He handled them carelessly, thrusting them into the big pockets of his painting-coat. Then he stood on the top step.

Then, and not till then, did he pause, his face showing drawn and anxious in the thin blue light. What was he fated to find below? His indecision was but momentary, and, shrugging his shoulders with an action that spoke of the fatalist, continued his way.

There were eighteen steps in all, but they were high and narrow and the descent was sharp. At the foot, an opening led apparently beneath the body of the château. With torch extended before him, Vivian proceeded. After a few moments the air grew colder, and the walls, where he touched them, were clammy and moss-grown. The man told himself that he was now beneath the moat. At intervals he passed other dark entries which ran in all directions, narrow

little tortuous alleys, many of which he explored for a few feet only to return to the main way. More than once, too, a pit yawned suddenly at his feet, and, had it not been for his inborn caution, the Château Chauville would have added yet another secret to its dark history. It was evident to Vivian that the builders of the hiding-place, deeming it necessary that an emergency exit should be at hand, had made it so that while egress was difficult, ingress was well-nigh impossible to those not knowing the pitfalls and the way of it.

It must have been after an hour's walking that the walls on either hand seemed to recede from Vivian until at last they were lost in the gloom beyond the reach of the rays of the little torch. Apparently, the tunnel had widened out into a chamber.

The man hesitated, somewhat mystified by the loss of the friendly walls, and, at the same moment, his foot came sharply into contact with some obstruction. He stumbled, the torch fell from his hand, a thousand stars danced before him—

He came to himself in bewilderment. The darkness closing in upon him seemed in the silence to be pressing on him. His head ached abominably, and there was a wound in the centre

of his forehead that was warm and sticky to his touch. Slowly it all came back to him and he knew he must have struck his head as he fell. He reached out, groping in the darkness in the hope of finding the torch uninjured. In this he was disappointed, but he made the discovery that he was lying beside a perpendicular structure of masonry, which, on raising his hand, he found to be the support of what felt to be a table of stone, low and heavily built.

Painfully he drew himself up on to his knees and so to his feet. Again his hands did duty for his eyes and a little cry of horror broke from the man's dry lips.

Beneath the touch of his sensitive hands, a form was taking shape, the unmistakable shape of a coffin. It seemed to him that, in the darkness, he could make out the dim outlines, the sinister bulge of the sides. Feverishly, now, he dropped to his knees and felt for the friendly torch. Light to him had suddenly become as necessary as food to a starving man. The walls of darkness hemmed him in so that he felt that he, too, was in a coffin—then he remembered that in his pocket were a few wax vestas. He struck one upon the stone slab and gazed round him as he held the flickering wax above his head.

Row upon row they lay, that noble army

of dead Dartignys, the square ends of their earthly resting-places standing out each from its little niche. On the slab before him lay the casket he had felt, a great coffin upon which a rusty cavalry sword and the moth-eaten remains of a flag showed in sombre pageantry.

Vivian Renton was not a nervous man, and, although the hand which held the flame trembled a little and filled the place with dancing shadows, he felt no fear. After all, one living man was more than a match for a whole army of dead warriors. By the light of the match he recovered his torch, which, to his relief, he found not to have suffered in its fall, and he began a systematic investigation of his surroundings.

He knew quite well, now, where he was ; old Henri had shown him proudly, only yesterday, the chapel in the grounds of Chauville, through the floor of which the dead of the house of Dartigny had from time immemorial been lowered to their last resting-places. The old man had, by means of a lever concealed in the ironwork of the railing, swung back the marble slab which covered in the vault so that his visitor might gaze into the gloom below—and, with a start, Vivian remembered that the mechanism had in some manner stuck and refused to move when the caretaker came to replace the slab.

Henri had told him that he would have to send into Blois for the locksmith, and the man in the vault, as he held his torch high, wondered whether this had yet been done. Above him, the oblong cut in the roof showed darkly, and at one end a corner of the partially closed slab was visible. Here, then, he told himself, was his one means of escape.

The distance, he judged, was not more than ten feet, the stone table reduced this to eight, and Vivian himself was but two inches short of six feet. He unwrapped from his waist the sash of red silk, which to sustain his rôle as a Bohemian artist, he wore swathed around him in place of a belt. This sash he now twisted rope-wise, and, mounting upon the stone table, peered up through the cavity. He remembered the little iron railings surrounding the tomb above, but his efforts to lasso a spoke of these with the scarf proved beyond his powers.

Then his eye fell upon the lid of the coffin, and, reaching down, he picked up the sword that lay upon it. At his touch the *sabretache* and hilt fell away, but the blade itself, notched and red with rust as it was, still was strong enough to serve his purpose. He made a slip-knot in the twisted silk, and, upon the point of the weapon, raised it carefully and hooked it over one of the corners of the tomb rails.

Vivian tested this fully with his weight and found that it held. He asked himself whether he should return to the treasure, but the thought of the tortuous trap he had been fortunate enough to traverse in safety, deterred him. Besides, in the pockets of his painting-coat was a considerable fortune and he had his key. The next time, however, that he entered, he would make sure that his line of retreat was open to him.

Seizing the scarf firmly in both hands, he raised himself until his toes rested upon the coffin lid. Then, with a little spring he started his climb. The sinister crack of splintering wood as he "took off" from the old casket caused a little thrill of horror to run through him, but he crept up, hand over hand, until at last his fingers gripped the edge of the flooring. With this hand-hold, and helped by the scarf, it was not difficult to clamber up, and Vivian, exhausted but happy, sank down in one of the little pews of the chapel.

Through the window above the altar the rays of a young moon struggled thinly. A glance at his watch told Vivian that it was half-past ten, and he looked round for a means of completing his escape. To a man who understood lockcraft as he did this was a simple matter, and, by the time the clock in the tiny belfry was chiming

eleven, M. Baptiste Dartin was in the little plantation of firs which surrounded the sacred building.

Cautiously he made his way to the lodge, and, scaling the gateway, crossed the bridge and reached the highroad. Midway between the château and the "Three Lilies" he came upon old Henri, who was returning from the inn.

Vivian stopped him. He had been into Blois, he told the man, to order the frames for the pictures. By the way, would it be convenient for him to finish the dining-room sketch the next afternoon? In the meantime, would Henri honour him by returning to the "Three Lilies," as his guest, there to open a bottle of the really excellent claret that house provided?

It took Vivian three days to finish the sketch, and when finally he departed from Massey he left old Henri in the seventh heaven of delight, for had not the gentleman taken his pictures in Blois and returned with them framed in g... Perhaps the gentleman would come again and paint more pictures, in fact he had almost said as much.

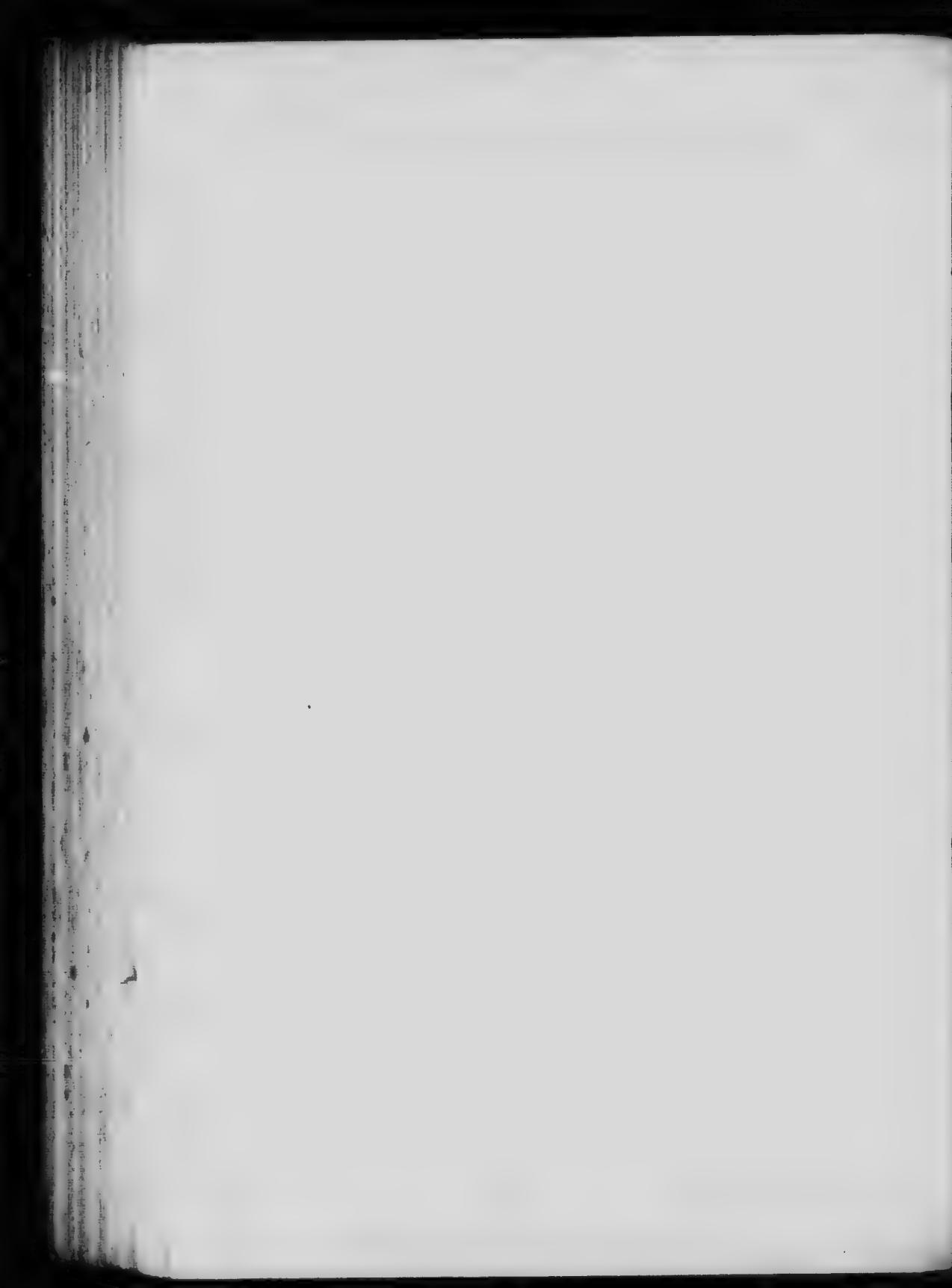
Three days later, the gentleman in question was seated with a jewel-dealer of great wealth and indifferent morals in an office in a street behind the Hoogstraat in Rotterdam. For the

first time in the merchant's life he was unable to deal single-handed with the collection which was set out before him. But there are other jewel-merchants in Holland, and, by the united efforts of three of the principal ones in the trade, the collection of diamonds, emeralds, and rubies from the Château Chauville changed hands to the satisfaction of the gentleman who had called to dispose of them, and who bore on his card the name—



BAPTISTE DARTIN.

PART II
THE BLACKMAILER



CHAPTER I

EDDIE HAVERTON REAPPEARS

EIGHTEEN months had passed since the night when Hubert Baxenter met with his death in Mortimer Terrace, and still, with the exception of the murderer himself, there was but one man who suspected anything of the truth of that mysterious affair.

True, Eddie Haverton had no knowledge when he parted from Vivian Renton in the fog, at the Regent's Park Circle, that his companion had any intention of returning to the house which they had left a moment before.

Knowing what he did, however, of the desperate straits of young Renton's finances, coupled with the sudden disappearance of that gentleman from all his usual haunts, left Eddie but one conclusion—and upon him it had a far-reaching effect. Morally, Mr Haverton was no whit better than he had ever been—it was not in his nature to be so; but his narrow escape from being enmeshed in the web of the

Regent's Park Mystery had given him a severe shaking up.

As he sat in his flat this bright spring morning, he told himself that, although the straight road was infinitely less interesting and lacked many of the allurements of the broader thoroughfare, it was smoother travelling for a man of middle age whose nervous system had never been of the best. He shuddered even now at the remembrance of what his life had been during those first few weeks following the discovery of the body on the roof. He remembered the feelings with which he had each morning opened his newspaper to watch the developments of the case in which, at any moment, he might be called upon to take a principal part.

Hour by hour, day and night, he had been pursued and tortured by the demons of anticipation. Not a knock on his door, nor a friendly tap on the shoulder in the street, but he told himself that his hour had come. The fact that he was innocent weighed little with him ; the explanation, should it become known that he was with Baxenter on that night, was beyond even his fertile brain. Unlike Renton, he had had no particular reason for removing any trace that would point to his presence in Mortimer Terrace. He said that there were a hundred and one things that might incriminate him, a

handkerchief, a scrap of paper, a cigar-end, a thumb-print.

It was this latter which held Eddie Haverton in the grip of a deadly fear ; he knew well that among the thumb impressions at Scotland Yard his had their place, and memories of three years he had passed in a tiny apartment overlooking the granite-strewn tors of Dartmoor, which had followed the taking of those impressions, came back to him in shuddering force.

But that time of terror was all over now. Hubert Baxenter lay unavenged in the family vault at Highgate, and the affair of his death no longer claimed the public attention. The police had apparently dropped the case, and the most blatant of the "yellow" press had long been silent on a subject from which they had squeezed all sensation.

And Eddie Haverton, ever since that November night, had run straight—that is to say, that in any venture to which he put his brain and hand, he was careful to remain well on the right side of the hedge planted by the Law around that particular business. He had been successful in the past, and his good fortune seemed to hold good now that he had chosen a more reputable mode of life. Everything he touched turned out well—a dairy, which he ran for a few months, was disposed of to a company at a large profit ; he

assisted the fallen fortunes of a penny weekly, and the circulation rose at once until it reached a quarter of a million.

But these were but speculations, side issues which Eddie's astute brain told him were good. It was in the theatrical field that his chief energies were expended. Always a keen play-goer, he rapidly turned to financial account his experience of many years. He did not advertise his present connection with the stage more than need be, but the theatrical world were well aware that he was the power behind the throne in more than a few touring successes, and that London managers were beginning to speak of and fear this man who robbed them, by his specious offers, of some of the most promising members of their companies. For Eddie Haverton's scent for "talent" was keen, and many a chorus girl and two-line actor owed a big success to the man who had watched them from the stalls.

It had just been like his luck that Haverton should secure the services of Stella Benham. It was his rule, and he found it a paying one, to watch the performances of understudies with infinite care; his knowledge of human nature, and of the life and jealousies of the world behind the scenes, gave him an advantage that he was not slow to take.

Stella's reign in the name part of *The Slum*

Duchess had been but brief. Miss Foster, who had hoped to stimulate the taste of the public by her absence and to return to them enhanced by comparison, rapidly recovered from her indisposition on hearing of the success of her understudy. She returned to her duties in three days, and Stella was again relegated to her previous position in the front row of the chorus.

But this was, to her, impossible after those glorious three days in the public eye. She had fondly hoped, when the applause had sounded in her ears, that it rang the knell of drudgery in the profession as far as she was concerned, and that before her stretched the rose-strewn path of success. She had caught a glimpse of the orchard and to leave the fruit was hard.

The stuffy common dressing-room now seemed to her more stuffy than ever, the one dresser to four girls was a very different person from the woman who had for three nights done her hair and buttoned her shoes with such respectful attention. The talk of her companions, too, their suppers, their loves, all struck Stella as being essentially vulgar. A lady by birth, she had never been really popular with these girls, whose looks were their only asset and whose figures were of vastly more account than their morals. Now that jealousy was added to their dislike, Stella's life became unbearable.

There is little doubt but that, had Mosenthal himself been at hand, some promise of better things would have been held out to the little actress. But the old manager was laid up with an attack of gout and was unapproachable, and his deputy, a monocled nonentity of tender years, seemed disinclined to act on his own initiative, and any ideas he might have had in the matter of Stella's advancement were promptly nipped in the bud by Miss Foster, who scented a possible dangerous rival in the eighteen-year-old girl.

And so it was that Haverton who had been waiting like some hawk watching its prey, swooped down and attacked Stella Benham with the offer of a principal part in a good tour. He had chosen the right moment, when, smarting under a keen resentment and longing to leave the surroundings which had become distasteful to her, the girl affixed her signature to a contract before she rightly knew what she was doing.

Eddie was thinking a great deal about the clever little actress as he looked out of the windows of his well-appointed flat. He had finished and enjoyed an early breakfast, and now sat smoking an excellent cigar and gazing out over Hyde Park, stretched out beneath him in all the enticing glamour of spring. It was barely

nine o'clock, but the grass was already well peopled and the musical sounds of motor-horns, as the cars sped westward along Piccadilly, told him that the town-dwellers were taking early advantage of this May Sunday.

Stella — a pretty name — Stella Haverton would sound well, eh? Eddie tried to tell himself that fifty-eight was but the prime of a man's life, a little before the time perhaps, and that hair a little grey over the ears was not unattractive. His two great imperfections had had a most beneficial effect not only upon the actions of Mr. Eddie Haverton, but upon the appearance of that gentleman.

His mirror, as he stood from the window to it, showed him a well-set-up man, broad and full-chested without being stout. His hair, taken straight back from the brows, successfully disguised a partial baldness, and his moustache, small and trim, when brushed up at the ends and gave something of a military aspect to his face. He did not need the monocle which was impossible from his right eye; but he wore it as an ornament, and it suited and gave a certain dignity to his rather large face.

He took from his pocket a tiny red memorandum-book, and consulted it. The company in which Stella was "starring" had finished the night before at Barchester, and were opening

to-morrow at the neighbouring manufacturing town of Maystone. Perhaps Stella and some of the company would spend the Sunday in Bar-
chester, preferring the delightful old county-
town to the smoke and grime of Maystone, in
which case—well, his new “Sidley” would take
him down in no time—it would be a run
anyway. After all, it was a pity to stay in
town on a day like this.

Eddie Haverton pressed the little electric button by the fireplace and ordered the car to be ready in half an hour,

CHAPTER II

BLACKMAIL

THE long, straggling High Street of the cathedral town of Barchester lay somnolent in a Sabbath calm. The Barcastrians, for the most part, were within doors, but a few who put devotion before digestion were hurrying off, in answer to the call of the bell in the grey cathedral tower, to afternoon service. At one of the bow-windows of the Angel Hotel, and with the debris of an excellent luncheon before them, Eddie Haverton sat with the manager of the little Theatre Royal, whose decorative façade of red brick was visible a little way up the High Street.

The spin out from London had given Eddie an enviable appetite, and as he sat there, gazing through the smoke of his cigar over the roofs and spires of the beautiful old town to their background of shadow-stained downs, he felt that the world was a very desirable place—to those who were apprecia-

tive and who had the wit to find out its soft places.

He emptied what remained of his liqueur into his cup of black coffee and looked across at the clean-shaven face of the manager.

"So Miss Benham has not gone on to Maystone?"

"No; she and Wally Burns and two of the others are out at Adderbury Hall — oh, of course," and Reggie Danson laughed, "you don't know 'the good thing.'"

Haverton looked puzzled. "The good thing?" he queried.

"That's what we call him at the theatre. Pots and pots of money, and a patron of the arts as portrayed at the Theatre Royal, Barchester. He has a lovely place about two miles out on the London road, and he looks in at the show twice or three times a week. Most towns have a man like him, else I don't know what some of the actors would do for beer——"

"What they call a 'mug' —eh?"

"No, Mr Haverton, that's just it, Mr Dartin's no 'mug.' He just likes to be around with the crowd, and doesn't mind paying for the privilege. I imagine he came into his money suddenly and had some sort of an idea that the county would take him up. Lord! he didn't know the Barchester crowd. They won't look at him,

and, as he likes company, he finds it at the theatre."

"What's on to-day, then—garden-party?"

Reggie Danson laughed.

"That's the sort of thing—lobster-scramble. Oh, he'll do them well, all right. I can see Wally wading into the Mumm—what?"

Eddie Haverton was silent for a moment, then :

"Wonder if I could join them? It sounds rather alluring, and I want to see Miss Benham about a new topical song to slip into Act II. Think that's excuse enough? Besides, I don't feel like going back to town yet."

"Sure. I'll ring him up; it's the more the merrier with him. He wanted me to go over, but Sunday's the only day when I can catch up with my correspondence." The young manager did not say that there was another reason in the shape of a very pretty little Mrs Danson and a five-year-old little Danson maid to whom Sunday was "Daddy's Day," and as such was to be respected.

He crossed the room and took down the receiver of the telephone.

"7X1—yes—that's it, Dartin's place, that's 7X1?—right, I'll hold on. Good afternoon, Mr Dartin—it's me, Reggie. The manager of the company has turned up here in his car, and

wants to see Miss Benham. What—come over to you there? I'll ask him." Danson turned and put his hand over the mouth of the instrument. " You're to go over at once, Mr Haverton." He turned again to the telephone : " Hullo—Mr Haverton's compliments, and he'll start right away. No, thanks all the same—my correspondence, you know. Good-bye."

It was a merry little party that splashed the vivid lawns of Adderbury Hall on that Sunday afternoon in May. Stella Benham, radiant in a tussore dress and shady hat, big with roses, was sharing, from the depths of a wicker-chair, a plate of strawberries with Wally Burns, the genial little comedian of the company, who, seated on a cushion at her feet, kept the party in high spirits with his small witticisms, trivial little remarks well suited to after-lunch ease on a sun-bathed lawn. Louis Derril, the " hero," lay at full length on the daisy strewn grass, listening to the small talk of Ada Clairton, the sprightly little lady who played second parts and understudied the " lead."

" Half a quid a pound, if they cost a penny ; and to think that I started this glorious day on a cup of cocoa and an elderly haddock !" and Wally sighed as he popped the luscious fruit into his large mouth. " Ups and downs, ups and downs—no, Miss Benham, I absolutely refuse to

take the last one, I—oh, here's our host come back."

It would have taken a keen eye indeed to have recognised the Vivian Renton of eighteen months ago in the trim-bearded man who, in a suit of well-cut flannels, came smiling across the lawn to join his guests.

"A thousand apologies, good friends, for leaving you. It was the telephone—I swear I'll have it cut off on Sundays. It's Danson; he says that your manager has turned up at Barchester. I've asked him to come over. Is it all right? I mean, he won't spoil sport, will he? I didn't catch his name—Harton, isn't it?"

Stella looked up from under the brim of her hat. "Haverton, Mr Dartin, Eddie Haverton."

For once the nerves of Vivian Renton played him false. For the life of him, he could not repress the start of fear, and all the will-power of which he was possessed was unable to force the blood back to his cheeks. The danger was so near, so present—and he had thought it dead. Even at this moment the motor containing the man he desired least in all the world to meet might come through those great gates which peeped out among the trees. He glanced in the direction of the road as he dropped limply into a chair.

Wally Burns was the first to notice that all was not well with their host. He jumped up from his cushion and laid a hand on Dartin's arm.

"You are ill, Mr Dartin, the sun——?"

The fear-stricken man seized on to the excuse. It was an ordinary one, and, had he had time, he would have thought of something more convincing. He tried to smile. "Yes," he said weakly, "it's the sun. I had a touch of sun-stroke in China once. I—I think I'll go in and lie down. No, Mr Burns, don't you come. I'll be all right and with you again in an hour. Barker will serve tea to you here." He rose from his chair and turned to the girl: "Pray make my excuses, Miss Benham, to Mr Har—Harberton — this is a shabby way to greet him, I'm afraid, but——"

Dartin put a hand to his throat, and, turning, walked slowly towards the house. The party rose to their feet with murmured sympathy, but he waved them aside. They watched him enter through the French windows into the dining-room.

Once inside the house, Dartin showed little sign of illness in his movements. He gazed rapidly round the room, his brain working shrewdly. On a side-table a photograph of himself, taken a year previously, stood in a silver frame. Vivian

whipped it up and hid it away beneath his coat. Then he hurriedly mixed and drank a brandy-and-soda.

As he put the glass down, the distant sound of a hooter came to him from the direction of the road. Another hurried look round the room, then the man leapt up the stairs to his bedroom, from behind the curtains of which he watched the arrival of the new-comer.

And Mr Eddie Haverton, when he joined the members of his company on the lawn, expressed his regrets that Mr Dartin, who, as Wally had told him, had done them so remarkably well, was not there to meet him and receive his thanks. Then, with a little sigh of content, he sank into a chair beside that of Miss Stella Benham.

It was some months since he had set eyes on the girl, and he could not but admit to himself that there was a difference in her. He could not say that she had actually lost any of her beauty; there was nothing that would not be quickly remedied by a holiday and happiness.

It was such a different life from the one she had imagined. The little flat shared with her mother—the dainty little mother who had found it beyond her strength to tour with her daughter, whom she now saw at such long intervals—com-

pared disastrously with the dingy lodgings changed each week. The men she was thrown into touch with, too—decent enough fellows, good-hearted to a fault—were so different to Robert Baxenter, whose serious grey eyes and clean-cut face were seldom absent from Stella's thoughts. Small wonder that the emptiness of her life, and anxiety over her own suggested year of probation, were reflected in the girl's looks.

"I'm afraid, Miss Benham, that the rest of the tour will be dull after all this. Your host does things uncommonly well. I—" Eddie stopped suddenly and sniffed the air; then he turned to Burns. "Where did you get that cigar?" he asked.

The little comedian looked surprised at the abruptness of the question.

"Why, Mr Haverton, it's one of Mr Dartin's. There's a box inside—shall I—"

"Oh no, Wally, thanks; it reminded me of a man I knew once who smoked them—'La Renabas,' I think the name of the brand was; they—"

Eddie Haverton broke off and sat gazing across the stream into the freshness of the woods on the opposite bank. Barker came over the grass carrying a dainty tea-table. He was sorry to say that his master was not much

better. If they would excuse him, he would not rejoin them. A little sleep in a darkened room with entire quiet was all that was needed. No, there was no necessity to send for a doctor; his master was used to these attacks. Mr Dartin hoped that his guests would make themselves quite at home—really, there was nothing to worry about.

As the man rolled off his message, Eddie watched him narrowly. Into his eyes came a curious look. It was strange that the illness of Mr Dartin should synchronise so with his arrival. The cigar, too—he didn't remember having seen one of the little-used brand since——Eddie turned suddenly on Stella.

"I suppose you didn't have *prawns in aspic* for lunch—eh, Miss Benham?" he asked abruptly.

The girl gave a little surprised laugh.

"Why, Mr Haverton, you're quite a detective. Yes, we did have *prawns in aspic*, but it can't be that which upset Mr Dartin; we all had some."

"No, it's not that; I didn't mean it in that way—I—I—was thinking of something else. I say, you people," he turned to the others, "it's hardly the thing to impose on Mr Dartin's hospitality. If you like, I'll tell my chauffeur to run you round to Ellington; it's a lovely

drive. The road cuts through the downs. I'm going to walk back ; there are a few ideas I want to work out—besides, I don't get half enough exercise. Wally, come up with me to the house to find Barker, and send our farewells up to Mr Dartin."

He took the little comedian by the arm and set off across the lawn. When he spoke, it was in a whisper.

"Tell me, Wally, what kind of a man is this Mr Dartin, tall—fair ?"

"Oh, it's hard to—wait, there's a photo of him in the dining-room, here, through these windows—nice room, what!—well, that's funny!"

Haverton had advanced into the room. He wheeled round on Wally.

"What is ?"

"Why, the photo. It was here at lunch, on this little table—I saw it—it's gone."

Eddie thought for a moment. He was smiling.

"Do I understand you, Wally, that Mr Dartin's photograph was here at lunch and has been removed since ?"

"Absolutely."

"Well, never mind. Come, they'll be waiting for us," and the two men hurried after the rest of the party, who, having made a hasty tea, were gathered round the car which stood near the gates.

Eddie raised his hat as the motor slid away down the level road, standing there until a spur of the downs hid it from sight, then turned and slipped into the shelter of the little plantation of firs which surrounded the lodge gates. He remembered that the lawns facing the dining-room windows terraced down to the edge of a tiny stream, and that beyond that were woods, to which a little rustic bridge led. From where he stood he could see Barker clearing away the tea-things, and, awaiting his opportunity, Eddie made his way, keeping as far as possible in the shadow of the shrubberies, to the seclusion which the woods promised.

From their leafy shelter he was able to get a good view of the house, and, more particularly, of the windows of the dining-room. He knew very well in his own mind that the "sunstroke" of the owner of Adderbury Hall would soon yield to the treatment of his guests' departure. It was pleasant, too, for the town-bred man to be waiting here, pleasant to see the trees in their toilettes of spring, and the masses of primroses, dying off now to give place to the hyacinths which shimmered in patches of powder-blue around him. The house itself showed no signs of life, save a clatter of crockery which came from what were evidently the kitchens.

The sun had reached the top ridge of the western downs, and was staining the sky with orange and rose and glory. The air was cool here under the trees, and perfumed with mosses, and alive with the vespers of birds and the tiny hum of insects.

For perhaps an hour the man paced up and down between the beech trunks before he noticed that a rose-coloured light was shining out from the dining-room, and Eddie said that his waiting was over. He recrossed the bridge and walked quickly over the darkening lawns. Avoiding the gravelled paths and keeping to the grass borders he approached the house.

He could make out Vivian quite clearly. He was seated at a desk looking through some papers, and the watcher by the window could see plainly from his face that he had not yet entirely recovered from his recent shock. Eddie stood for some time studying the features and figure of his late friend, then pushed open the glass door.

"Good evening, Vivian," he said quietly; "headache gone?"

The man at the desk gave one great start as he wheeled round in his chair, then in a moment his nerve returned to him. It seemed to Vivian as though he had known that he would hear the voice that now spoke to him,

and he felt a vague relief that suspense was to give place to action. He rose and looked steadily at the intruder.

"You—Eddie? Come right in—have something?"

He pushed the decanter and syphon across the table.

"Yes, Vivian, it's me—surprised to see me, eh?"

The man standing by the desk gave a short laugh.

"Not at all, Eddie, I have been expecting you since—er—about four o'clock. *Do help yourself; it's good whisky.*"

Eddie mixed himself a drink and held it up in salutation.

"Not surprised, eh?" he said, as he put down the glass on the table. "Now, you are pleased?"

"No, Eddie, I can't say I'm pleased. You see, I wanted the identity of Vivian Renton to disappear for ever——"

"And the memory of Mortimer Terrace to fade away and gradually die, eh?" interrupted Eddie.

Vivian turned on the speaker. His eyes glinted, but he was quite cool. He took a cigarette from a silver box on the desk and tapped it in the palm of his hand.

"As to that, my dear boy, I fear nothing. Whether I had a hand in that affair or not doesn't affect you. You and I are in the same boat there.—Of course, Eddie, I suppose it's blackmail—I remember that used to be your strong game!"

Eddie flushed at this.

"I'm living straight now, Vivian," he said; "but we are old pals and you seem to have struck it rich. I'm only moderately well-off."

"Exactly, Eddie. As I said, I suppose it's blackmail! You can have what you want in moderation. I can spare it. But, understand, I admit nothing about Mortimer Terrace. I'm thinking of some of the other exploits in which I worked alone, but which you knew about. Have another drink."

Eddie, nothing loth, did as Vivian suggested. He looked as though he needed it. Things were not turning out quite as he had imagined they would. He had expected something rather more from his entrance. His keen sense of the dramatic suffered.

"I say, Vivian, I think you are putting rather a hard construction on a friendly call," he said, after a little pause. "I tell you I'm going straight—have been for three years; but I'm thinking of marrying, and—and I want my wife to have all she wants. I am only worth a few

thousands, and I thought, for the sake of old times——”

“Oh! cut it short, Eddie. I’ve heard all that before,—leading up to a ‘loan,’ eh? Wasn’t it a *loan* we got from young Lord Derricsay in that club in Soho? No, Eddie, business is business, and matters need no mincing with me. I’m going to write you out a cheque for five hundred pounds. Every half-year I will send you a like cheque. Now listen. If ever the identity of Vivian Renton is revived, these payments cease. I don’t care whether it’s your doing or not—they cease.”

“Really, Vivian, you’re a brick, I didn’t expect——” Eddie stopped as he saw that the other had drawn out his cheque-book and was writing.

“There you are, Eddie. I’ll walk down with you to the town if you like. I’ve had rather a headache—sunstroke in China, you know,” with a little laugh. “By the way, I’m sorry I’m such a poor hand at a disguise.”

Eddie folded up the slip of pink paper and put it in his waistcoat-pocket.

“The disguise, dear boy, is excellent. I’d have passed you in the street any day. But there’s not twenty men in London who smoke ‘La Renabas’ cigars—and I understand that *prawns in aspic* still hold their fascination over you,

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—remember them at Scott's? Mr Dartin,
I felt rather ashamed of you this afternoon
—I did really. Nerves are like some other
things — they get rusty if you don't use
them."

CHAPTER III

THE CREST

STELLA BENHAM held the glittering object away from the multitudinous folds of tissue paper in which it had been wrapped, and the corners of her pretty mouth drooped ever so little. From over the coffee-urn Mrs Benham waited for information.

"It's from Robert, mummy—there's no letter, only a card 'With many happy returns, from your pal, Bobby.'" The girl gave the paper a final shake. "I thought he would have been here; he's never missed before," and Stella handed the slender chain with the odd-shaped locket across the table as she spoke. Mrs Benham took it and laid it by her plate while she searched for her glasses.

Her daughter had her head bent over her correspondence, which, this being the morning of her twentieth birthday, was proportionately large, or she would have noticed the look of wonder which quickened in Mrs Benham's eyes

as she peered through her spectacles at the crest engraved on the locket. Robert had at first intended giving Stella Mr Dartin's gift to him at once, but on second thoughts had decided to wait until the girl's birthday, so that it could not be said that he was showing signs of weakening in their compact.

"It's very charming, Stella—and quaint. I wonder where Robert bought it? It looks as though it might be an heirloom of some old family. I—" and Mrs Benham bit her lip and glanced covertly over to her daughter. For the rest of the meal she was very quiet.

It was a glorious morning in late May and the sunshine flooded the little dining-room of the flat. It sparkled merrily on the silver coffee-service and lent an added glory to the brown head bent over the letters. By a happy coincidence, Stella had been able to spend the week with her mother, the company having an engagement at one of the big suburban theatres, which was within a short cab-ride from Bellenden Mansions.

But in the ointment of the girl's birthday joy was one little fly. She had hoped that Robert would remember, and perhaps take advantage of the day. True, he had remembered; but the little card beside her plate was not very satisfactory. Stella wanted more than that. She

had known Bobby now for three Mays, and on her other birthdays he had always been the first to greet her—he had always been over there by the door, a great bunch of roses in his hand. Perhaps Stella missed him more this morning than any time in the last months, those months which had been anything but ones of happiness to the little actress.

She had first met Robert Baxenter at a river-party at Cookham, and the young people had been drawn together at once. The scene of the party had been suited to the occasion, the broad sweep of the river, the shelving masses of foliage, the little rush-fringed path, the meadows gold-dusted with buttercups, all had had their part in the romance, and when the punts slid homewards under the moon, Robert and Stella knew in their hearts that they mattered a great deal to each other. There was something in the stern, good-humoured seriousness of the solicitor which attracted the girl; and he, too, soon found that his life's delight rested with the charming little butterfly who laughed at him and who teased him to distraction.

Within a month Robert Baxenter was a regular caller at the flat. Stella thought now with longing of the "big brother" lectures he used to read her, lectures that grew in seriousness as the man's love took possession of him. How she

had teased him and tormented him ! She pictured him sitting over there in the wicker chair by the window and she wished that he were there now.

She came back from her dreams with a little sigh. Mrs Benham had left the room, and Stella finished her breakfast in anything but a birthday state of mind. She remembered with irritation that there was a "call" at eleven that morning to try over some new songs. She thought of the others who would be there—Wally Burns with his cheap witticisms, Ada Clairton with her violent scents, Derril with his swelled head and artificial voice, the bullying manager, and—

With a start she saw that the clock pointed to half-past ten and she hurried in to her mother's room to bid her good-bye. As she entered, Mrs Benham turned guiltily and closed a little drawer of the dressing-table hastily. Stella noticed nothing, for she threw her arms round the dainty little figure and kissed her.

"Good-bye, mummy darling ; I feel like swearing, I really do—it's a rotten, rotten day."

Stella accompanied each adjective with a stamp of her little shoe, and, with another kiss, she was gone.

At eleven o'clock Mr Robert Baxenter presented himself at Bellenden Mansions. He

carried in his hand a magnificent bouquet of white roses.

"Come in, Robert. Stella's at the theatre—a rehearsal, I think, she said it was. I rather think she expected you to breakfast."

Robert placed the flowers carefully upon the piano and smiled.

"Do — do you think she minded, Mrs Benham ?"

Mrs Benham returned the smile.

"My dear Robert, I never express an opinion on things I know nothing about. But, never mind Stella, I want to speak to you about something else—about this."

Robert took the chain and locket Mrs Benham held out to him.

"Oh ! there's quite a romantic history attached to this, Mrs Benham ; it's been in——"

"Don't tell me yet, Robert—now I want you to look at this," and Mrs Benham held out for the solicitor's inspection an antique signet-ring of dull gold. He crossed to the window after one glance and carefully compared the devices on the two ornaments. They were in each case much worn and indistinct, and Robert knew that there were many coats of arms in the French nobility which had the starred band at the top of their shields, but there were other points in the devices of the locket and ring that made the

man feel sure in his own mind that they were identical. He raised his head and looked at Mrs Benham.

"May I ask, Mrs Benham, where this ring came from?"

"It has been in my husband's family for many years. I believe it was originally in the possession of the girl who married Stella's great-grandfather, I think a year or two before Waterloo. As far as I can recollect, the story, as my husband told it, was that the girl had been adopted by the uncle of the man who married her. Joshua Benham was a doctor, and it seems that he was called in to a case in which the patient died, leaving totally unprovided for a little girl of about four years of age. Joshua's wife, who had no children of her own, took the child to her heart, and all inquiries failing to establish her identity, they brought the girl up as their own. Beyond this ring, and the few French words the child could prattle, they could learn nothing concerning her."

"There is little doubt that she belonged to some French family in hiding, but Joshua perhaps did not press his inquiries as much as he might. I suppose the child grew dear to them, as adopted children often do, and they had the excuse that the political state of France prevented them from pursuing their

inquiries on the spot. Then there came the war between the two countries, and the chance of finding out the history of the lonely little girl passed."

Robert was standing gazing out over the gardens. It seemed to him that what Mrs Benham was telling him was all ancient history, and that he knew it all before. Truly, fate had marked him out as an actor in a romance that was stranger than any stage drama. He turned to Mrs Benham.

"Does Stella know anything of this?"

"I was going to tell her to-day, her birthday, and to give her the ring."

A look of relief passed over the young solicitor's face.

"Then I want you to wait a little while before you tell her. I have good reasons for what I ask. Your story has interested me very deeply." He took up his hat and held out his hand: "Good-bye, Mrs Benham."

"But you will stay and take lunch. Stella will be——"

"I think not, Mrs Benham; I have a busy day before me. The flowers are for Stella, and there is a letter with them. In the light of what you have just told me, I want you to remember that that letter was already written before you showed me the ring."

"Yes, Robert; but what's all the mystery?"

"Because, Mrs Benham, the letter is my capitulation, my unconditional surrender to Stella. In it I have ignored our year's contract, which is not quite up, and have asked her to marry me. Had I not written it before hearing your story, I could never have done so without laying myself open to a grave misconstruction. I have told her that I will meet her at the theatre to-night. Please do as I wish, and tell her nothing of the story you have told me."

And Mrs Benham promised, and, after Robert had left, she locked the trinket away again in the dressing-table drawer. Stella's roses she placed in water in the centre of the table, daintily set out for luncheon, and the letter she put by her daughter's plate.

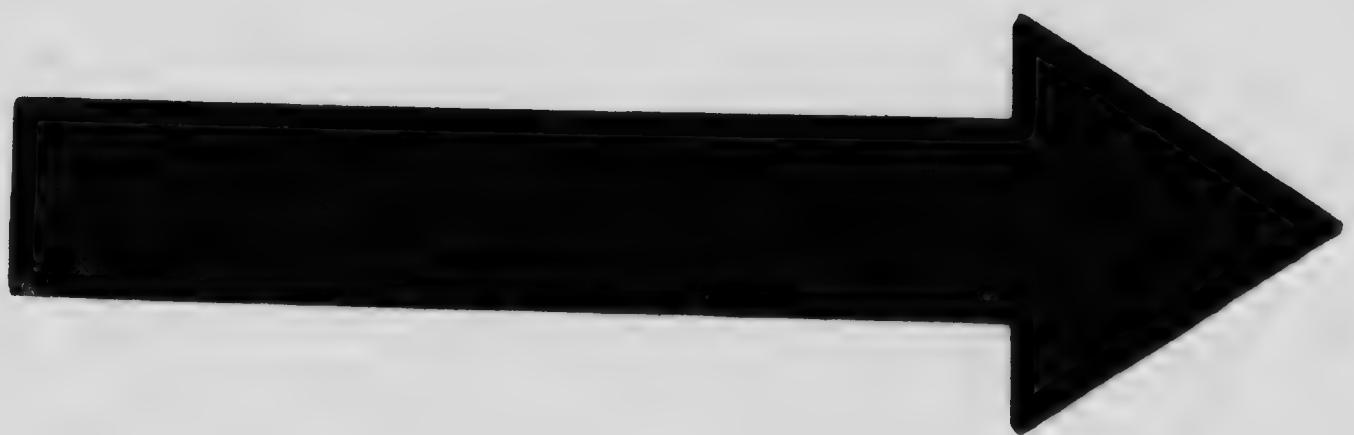
Robert walked most of the way back to his office. He felt that exercise was what he needed if he were to unravel the romantic tangle of the Dartignys. Stella, evidently, was the legitimate heiress to what was in the chest left by her great-great-great-grandfather, Marie Brissac de Dartigny, more than a century ago.

But Dartin had come upon the scene in the nick of time, and his present possession gave him the nine proverbial legal points. It would be

no easy matter now to dislodge the owner of Adderbury Towers. That the inheritance had turned out better than Dartin had hinted was apparent from the style kept up at Barchester. He wondered why the man had been so reticent as to what the chest had contained.

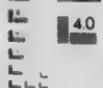
Robert had seen little of Dartin during the last year. He was not one to whom he was attracted, and although the owner of the Towers had tried to be friendly, the solicitor had not unduly encouraged him. At that moment there was an invitation on the desk at his chambers asking him down for a few days to Barchester, an invitation which Robert had made up his mind to decline.

In the light, however, of what he had just heard, he changed his mind and decided to accept. There might perhaps be an opportunity of finding out how the land lay, and in Stella's interests he felt he was justified, if not in spying, at all events in keeping his eyes open. There was no shadow of suspicion in his mind against the claimant to whom he had surrendered the chest. He accepted as a fact that Dartin was in truth a descendant of the Dartignys, more distant than Stella, certainly, but the solicitor told himself that he had fulfilled to the letter the condition of the trust. He felt a bitterness against the man, or rather against the luck



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that had given him a fortune to which he had no moral right, but that was all. Doubt as to the honesty of the man at Adderbury Towers had, as yet, not crossed his mind — that was to come later.

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CHAPTER IV

THE SEEDS OF SUSPICION

ROBERT BAXENTER was a happier man than he had been for months, as, at half-past ten that evening, he approached the stage-door of the "Gardenia" theatre in Hackney. In his own mind he felt but little anxiety as to the result of his letter to Stella, and, as the stronger, he told himself that it had been his part to hold out the branch of peace.

As he noticed the neighbourhood, he told himself that he had not taken the step any too soon. The crowd that had infested the stage-door of the "Odeon" had been neither intellectual nor desirable, but it had at least been fairly clean ; the solicitor shuddered as he glanced at his present surroundings. The place which gave access and exit to the artistes taking part in the "Gardenia" productions was a narrow, low door set in a high brick wall, covered with ragged posters and worn shiny near the doorway

by the shoulders of the loafers who nightly gathered there. Just within, Robert caught sight of an untidy individual behind a little window, reading the evening paper by the light of a wire-globed gas-jet.

The denizens of the place were there now, filling the narrow pavement in little shapeless groups. Their hats were thrust back from oily foreheads, cheap cigarettes hung from their expressionless lips, they seemed waiting—and always waiting. Perhaps the crowd changed sometimes in its individuals; if so, it was not apparent, the type remained.

At the end of the little lane in which the stage-door was, Robert could see the night life of the crowded suburb, the teeming mass of people and the dusty atmosphere lit up in yellow patches by the glare of huge naphtha lamps flaring over the costers' barrows. The cries of the vendors mingled harshly with the roar of traffic. At the corner the lights of a great gin-palace shone out, and Robert wondered, as he saw the mob of humanity through its large plate-glass windows, to which atom of it belonged the tiny little girl who sat half asleep on the doorstep, a ragged doll clutched in the crook of her fragile arm.

It was a scene sordid in the extreme, and the waiting man felt as though he were a stranger

in a strange land, a land in which it was hard to breathe. The cigarette-smoking youths, too, seemed to resent his presence in the domain they had made their own, and Robert had difficulty in keeping to what he knew was the wiser course of ignoring their audible remarks.

The chimes of a near-by clock told eleven. Already two or three tawdrily dressed girls had come through the stage-door, attended by their cavaliers. Robert could see that in some cases they had not quite removed the make-up from their faces. As they stood beneath the gas-lamps they seemed consciously pleased at the attention they received from the gilded youth of Hackney. Then Stella came.

She stood for a moment, framed in the doorway, looking out, before she caught sight of Robert. Then she ran to him and gave his hand a little squeeze, and looked up with a great gladness in her grey eyes that told Robert that all was right with their world, and, heedless of the remarks of the interested spectators, he bent and kissed her as he hurried her away.

As they passed the corner, Robert saw that the child was still on the step of the public-house. She was asleep now and had covered over the little doll with a corner of her thread-

bare jacket. He tried to hide the sight from the girl by his side, but Stella saw the pathetic little figure and she clutched at the man's arm.

"Can't we do something? Oh! Robert, what was that you said once about little children, and that a woman's life should be found in their eyes? I have thought of it so often since you said that, and I have grown to hate my audiences —the people who pay to see me."

She broke away from him, and he watched her as she went to the sleeping child and placed something into the little lap; he recognised it as a box of chocolates he had sent her that evening to the theatre. When she joined him again, Robert saw that there were tears in her eyes.

Mrs Benham was still up when they reached the flat, and one glance at Stella's radiant face was all that she needed to make her completely happy. The three did full justice to the dainty little meal that was awaiting Stella's return from the theatre. It was good, after the sordid surroundings of the suburbs, to sit here with the little shaded table-candles showing their rose light in the silver and glass and on the scarlet of the lobster in its bed of tender green, and on the gilt neck of the bottle of champagne — for was not this a betrothal

feast, one to be honoured and remembered for all time ?

The night was warm, and the young people stood on the little balcony overhanging the gardens. The man was leaning over the shoulders of the girl, and Stella was drinking in the love-talk of which her heart had so long been starved. They had so much to say to each other, these two foolish persons who had wilfully cut from their lives nearly a year of joy—so much time to make up.

"I will be away this week-end, Stella. I'm sorry, but it's a client in Lincolnshire ; he's got a lovely place, and some decent golf and fishing. By-the-by, it's at Barchester ; weren't you there on the tour ?"

"Yes, the week before last—who is the client ?"

"His name's Dartin ; there's a bit of a romance about the fellow, he——"

"Why, I met Mr Dartin, Bobby ; we had a kind of a picnic at his place. Fancy you knowing Mr Dartin !"

"I expect he knows theatrical people through Haverton, the man who finances your company. Dartin says in his letter that he will be there too—just the three of us."

Stella stood silent for a moment, twisting a lovely half-hoop of diamonds round the third

finger of her left hand. She remembered the sudden illness which had come over Dartin when Haverton's visit to Adderbury Towers was announced. She was certain that he had not mentioned that he was acquainted with the theatrical manager.

He didn't seem to know Mr Haverton on that day, Bobby. But Mr Dartin knew quite a lot about theatres. He must have seen everything worth seeing for ever so long. He said he remembered seeing poor me, even, in that small part in the 'Prince's' pantomime; he said I shaped well then, and—oh—a whole lot of nice things about me."

Bobby smiled indulgently.

"I can well believe that, dear. You had a little song; how did it go——?" He broke off with a start. "When was . . . last time you played that?"

"Why do you speak like that, Bob, —sharply?"

"Did I, dear? I was only thinking of something—when was it?"

"The first week in March, last year—there's mother calling, Bobby; poor dear, we're keeping her up. Good night, dearest—dearest and best! I'm so happy."

Robert walked the first part of the way back to his chambers, intending to pick up a late taxi when he reached the Marble Arch.

The night was very still, and he paced the deserted pavements thinking of what he had just heard.

It had been a day of strange happenings. The ring which Mrs Benham had shown him had quite put beyond doubt, in his own mind, the right of that lady's daughter to the Dartigny inheritance. But Robert's legal training told him that there was as yet nothing upon which he could act against Mr Baptiste Dartin. The man had done all that he was called upon to do in order that he should claim the chest; and although Stella was in the direct line, whilst Dartin was only—

Robert Baxenter stopped suddenly. Into his mind had come the first glimmerings of doubt, the first suspicion that the owner of Adderbury Towers was not all that he claimed to be. Why had the man lied to him? If he had seen Stella in the "Prince's" pantomime, his statement to Robert—that when he came to the Strand office was his first visit to London—was false. Why had he not claimed the inheritance before?

Suppose in some way Dartin had obtained knowledge of the document penned by old Adam Baxenter?

Could his late cousin have so far forgotten himself as to have shown it to anyone? But

Robert knew well the man that Hubert had been, and that, to him, the family trust must have been a fetish and sacred to his honour.

Possibilities crowded thickly upon the solicitor. There was so much to explain away—Haverton—the lies of Dartin—his cousin's murder, perhaps, had its explanation hidden somewhere in the maze of recent happenings. He looked out now for a cab ; he would get home and marshal his facts on paper. How lucky it was that he had not declined the week-end at Adderbury Towers.

For close upon an hour after Robert had reached Craven Street he sat at his desk, setting down with legal precision his array of facts. As he wrote, the conviction that all was not as it should be grew upon him, and that the antecedents of friend Dartin called for immediate attention. The man from Canada had at times shown a knowledge of London and its ways which had not always been, to Robert's thinking, that of one newly arrived in the metropolis. Many little remembrances, trivial in themselves, but which in the light of later events had a new significance, crowded upon him.

Suddenly the man put down his pen and pulled out a drawer in the desk before him. From an envelope he took a square of folded

paper—the scrap which Cantle had picked up in the room in Mortimer Terrace. It had lain forgotten in the old man's pocket for months before he had found it and had given it to his employer. It contained a few words only, and appeared to be the notes of the score of some game.

Robert had debated long with himself as to whether he should show this piece of evidence to the authorities, and had decided not to. In this he knew he was acting wrongly, but he felt that no useful object was to be served by reopening old wounds. He knew, too, that Hubert, dear old fellow that he always had been, would have been the last to desire it.

Not Robert alone, but all the members of the Baxenter family, had suffered by the notoriety of the case. For weeks their offices and their homes had been open to the calls of officials and the incessant questionings of the police, and Robert told himself that, after all, the scrap of paper would only set these men at work again and very likely lead to nothing.

He took the piece of paper now and opened it eagerly, placing beside it Dartin's letter of invitation. The handwriting had suddenly become of importance to him. As

he scanned it, he breathed a little sigh of disappointment.

Whoever had scrawled the few words and numerals that were before him, it certainly was not Mr Baptiste Dartin.

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CHAPTER V

THE EAVESDROPPERS

ALTHOUGH there was no reason why the solicitor should have expected that the writing on the scrap of paper should be in Baptiste Dartin's hand, he nevertheless experienced quite a sense of disappointment. The seed of suspicion, once sown in his mind, had grown amazingly, and Robert told himself that he had let this suspicion dominate him and to some extent bias his judgment.

After all, what direct evidence was there he could bring forward that could in any way incriminate the master of Adderbury Towers? The man's remark to Stella that he had seen her acting in the "Prince's" pantomime may have been just Dartin's idea of a compliment, the truth or otherwise of which did not matter. But Robert thought also of the particulars contained in the document left by his ancestor, old Adam Baxenter, details which seemed to be known so well to Baptiste Dartin. It was not within the bounds

of possibility that Hubert had either shown or spoken of the parchment to anyone—moreover, after his death it had been found, apparently untampered with, together with the solicitor's will in the hidden drawer of the bureau at the Regent's Park house.

No, Dartin's knowledge of the doings of Marie Brissac de Dartigny owed its source to other than the statement left by Adam Baxenter.

Taking one thing with another, Robert was not easy in his mind, and was far from being satisfied that all was as it should be. He felt convinced that, in some manner, underhand work was going on. Evidence or not against Dartin, the matter had taken too firm a hold on the solicitor's brain for him to think of being able to let it drop.

He put the notes he had jotted down, together with the scrap of paper picked up in Mortimer Terrace, in a large envelope and placed it in his pocket-case. It was daylight when he at last rose to prepare for bed. He crossed to the window, and pulled up the silken blind and looked out over the river. The sun had not yet dispersed the mists, but above his head the sky was blue and cloudless and gave promise of a glorious day.

The life of London, as yet, showed but little

signs of awakening. The stretch of Waterloo Bridge was deserted save for a string of three market-carts, banked high with cabbages, crawling over from some Surrey farm to Covent Garden Market. Below him the river, fringed with deserted wharves on the further side, flowed greyly past ; in mid-stream, a little group of barges sidled idly down with the tide. From the trees in the Embankment Gardens came the merry chattering of birds, and on the benches by the stone parapet Robert could see the huddled figures of the derelicts of the town, snatching uneasily a few moments' forgetfulness before they roused to face another day and to take up again their never-ending battle with fate.

The solicitor leant on the sill and drew in big breaths of the delicious morning air. Curiously enough, he did not feel sleepy ; the day that had passed had been so full, so fraught with interest, that fatigue seemed to have passed him by. His eyes roamed with a languid interest from point to point of the scene below him—the vivid patches of young green against the old grey of masonry, the scarlet of the geraniums in the flower-beds of the gardens, the opal-tinted Surrey shore bristling with chimneys, from one or two of which thin spirals of smoke were now curling lazily into the still air. The noise of shunting

trucks came clearly to him from the Waterloo terminus.

There came to him also the harsh clanking of buckets and the tap of hammers on wood. Looking down, Robert saw that the workmen had begun their daily toil on the erection of a new hotel on the corner site beneath him. A hoarding had been built up round the demolished houses, a structure of boards gay with posters. Robert found himself gazing at a gaudy picture of a spick-and-span, highly coloured liner, cutting her way through the gentle waves of a very blue sea. On the horizon a brilliant orange sun was throwing out his rays, and the man saw that these rays were woven into a single word—"Canada."

He must have been looking fixedly at it for some minutes before he discovered that a meaning was being sub-consciously conveyed to his brain from the advertisement on the hoarding. Canada—of course, Dartin came from Canada; he had written from a hotel in Quebec, and, in a flash, the man leaning from the window saw that much useful knowledge might be gained from careful inquiries made in the Dominion.

His firm had had many dealings with Canadian houses, and Robert remembered that in Quebec was a solicitor to whom Baxenter & Sons had

been of service but a few months back. Robert left his place by the window, and, seating himself again at his desk, composed a long cablegram addressed to Mr Adolph Le Page, Nassau Street, Quebec, in which he asked that gentleman to be so good as to make inquiries as to the antecedents and movements of a certain Mr Baptiste Dartin who was staying at the Dominion Hotel on or about the 2nd of June in the previous year.

The cablegram, when finished, was a formidable affair, as the sender did not wish to run the risk of mangling by use of a code. Mr Le Page was not a regular correspondent of the firm, and Robert hoped by sending his message in the easiest and fullest manner, to receive a reply of sorts before the end of the week, when he would be leaving for his visit to the subject of his inquiries.

Sleep seemed more than ever out of the question now that the sun was fully up and sending his golden shafts into the cosy apartments. Robert could hear Jowett in the tiny dressing-room, preparing the bath, and a thrill of anticipation ran through him as he thought of the refreshing coolness of the limpid water. That, together with fresh linen, breakfast, and a cigarette, were all that he needed.

At nine o'clock, Mr Robert Bantener, after

despatching his cablegram, entered his office feeling as fit as though he had retired to bed at ten the evening before.

And then for three days he went on in the even routine of the work of the law. Each evening found him at the little dingy suburban stage-door, but after that first night he was able to time his arrival more precisely, thus avoiding the weary wait in the sordid surroundings, and a taxi soon ran them out into streets where it seemed possible to breathe. Each evening, too, a dainty little supper would be awaiting them at the flat, and Robert tried to, and in part succeeded in, driving the problem of Mr Dartin and the Chauville inheritance from his mind, giving himself up unreservedly to his reunion with Stella and to again taking up the threads of his interrupted love-affair.

The girl, too, feeling as though a weight had been suddenly lifted from her heart, became again the radiant creature she had been when the young solicitor first met her and loved her at the river-party. For her life was now all sunshine on which there was no shadow, and it seemed as though her cup of happiness was fully charged.

Her stage career was, to her, now a thing of no moment, and her evening work was as

distasteful as it formerly had been fascinating. Her contract with Haverton had but another two months to run, and by its wording could not well be set aside without a large monetary sacrifice; after its conclusion, Stella hoped she would never see the inside of a theatre again—except from the other side of the footlights.

It was on the Friday morning that Robert found the reply to his cablegram awaiting him when he entered his office. His Canadian correspondent stated that he was still pursuing his inquiries and was writing at length by the next mail.

The cable stated simply that a gentleman of the name of Baptiste Dartin arrived on the S.S. *Touraine* from Havre in February of last year, and had left for London by the *Anconia*, which sailed from Quebec on the 4th of June. As far as Mr Le Page was aware, he was previously unknown in the Dominion. He was said at the hotel to be a man of rather dissolute habits, and one who possessed but few friends.

Robert sat with the slip of paper hanging limply in his hands. From the wall old Adam Baxenter looked down upon him, and now the other fancied that he read reproach in the painted eyes. He left his chair and fell to nervously pacing up and down the carpeted

room. His suspicions took on a more definite shape as he read and re-read the message. Dartin had not mentioned to him that he knew Paris ; more, Robert seemed to remember the man had distinctly said he had never been in France. Why, too, should he spend the time between February and June in Quebec ? He must have had some reason for putting off the claiming of the inheritance.

Whatever game it was that the owner of Adderbury Towers was playing, it was certainly not altogether a straight one. Robert thought of, and bitterly resented, the many ways in which Dartin had deceived him, and he registered a vow in his mind, then and there, that nothing should be allowed to stand in the way of his probing the secret to the bottom.

It might not be altogether playing the game, on his part, to spy upon the man whose hospitality he was about to accept, but for Stella's sake, and for the sake of the right, he could not afford to be nice in choosing the weapons with which to fight Mr Baptiste Dartin. If there was any fraud, then it should be met with fraud if need be. By seven o'clock that evening he would be at Adderbury Towers ; he would enter the enemy's camp as an honoured guest, but with the firm resolve to miss no

single chance that promised a solution of the matter he had in hand.

On the journey northward Robert leant back and gazed steadily out over the flying landscape, letting his mind run at random among the facts and suspicions he had accumulated, and steeling his heart to the task before him. It was well, perhaps, for his purpose that Stella had driven down to the station to see him off; for he told himself that it was for that dainty little figure in muslin, who had waved to him until the bend of the platform had hidden her from view, that he was working. If ever ends justified means, surely they did so now. All the same, the young solicitor wished that it had been anyone but his host that he was acting against.

The journey was not a long one, a coach being attached to the mail and slipped at Barchester, and at half-past six Robert was standing on the platform of the station of the cathedral town. A sleepy station was that of Barchester, save at the arrival and departure of the London trains. It lay some half-mile outside the town, the roofs of the houses of which Robert could see in the valley and straggling up the lower slopes of the downs.

Dartin was there to greet him, and Robert felt a curious catch at his heart as he received the handclasp and looked into the laughing

eyes. Surely this man was not one to weave such a web of conspiracy, the outlines of which were already taking shape in the solicitor's brain—a scheme even in which murder played a part!

And then he found himself in a comfortable "jingle," bowling merrily down the winding road that led to, and became, the High Street of Barchester. The little town looked very peaceful in the calm of the early evening. The High Street, with its irregular buildings and quaint bow-windows jutting out at unexpected angles, dipped steeply to the market-place in the centre of the town. Above the red roofs the square tower of the cathedral rose up, grey and sentinel-like. It was market day, and Dartin had to thread his little vehicle in and out among the carts of carriers and farmers as he crossed the cobbled square and drove through the wide oak-timbered gateway of the Crown Hotel.

"Mr Haverton returned?" Dartin asked the ostler who came running out from the stable to attend the horse.

"Ain't seen 'im, sir. Going to shut out, sir?"

Dartin handed the reins to the man and alighted.

"No—put her on the pillar rein. Come in, Baxenter; you'll be dry after the journey.

Haverton had a little shopping to do. By-the-by, you'll like Haverton — he'll join us here."

Eddie came to them a few minutes later in the low-ceilinged apartment, panelled in mellow oak, which was the pride of the "Crown," and indeed of all Barcastrians. There was many a visitor to the cathedral who, much against his principles, was persuaded within the precincts of a hotel, for the first time in his life, by that mellow oak panelling and the great cellars of the "Crown," cellars built like the crypt of the cathedral itself and from which, rumour had it, secret passages ran out under the market-square to the old Priory opposite. A great asset to the owner of the "Crown" were its antiquities, for more often than not the visitors, being once inside, felt it incumbent upon them to partake of a glass of sherry wine—a very small one, please—and a biscuit.

In spite of Dartin's prophecy, Robert did not like Eddie Haverton. Perhaps, without knowing it, he placed him among the ranks of the enemy and approached him with something of a bias. But it was not part of his scheme to show his true feelings, and it was a merry party of three which sat behind the sturdy little mare as she took the road to Adderbury Towers.

In the art of entertaining Dartin possessed few equals. It had been his fond hope, when he engaged the *chef* of a high-class London restaurant, that the advent of a wealthy owner to the Towers would bring around him the élite of the countryside to eat his dinners and praise his wines, that, in fact, Barchester society would take him up and make him and themselves happy. It did not take him very long, however, to understand the social conditions which hem in the residents of a cathedral town, and beyond a few bachelors and a colonel of intemperate habits, men who washed down their pride with the excellent vintages of the cellars of the Towers, Dartin possessed no friends.

Perhaps there were a few of the half-pay officers with which Barchester abounded, who, could they have taken a peep at the dinner-table where Dartin sat with his two guests, would have regretted in secret the restrictions which prevented them showing more cordiality to the new-comer. The colonel of intemperate habits had been asked to meet Haverton and Baxenter, but his chair was vacant; doubtless the fact that it was market-day, when many members of the County Club came in from outlying districts, being accountable for the non-appearance.

The light from the candles in their scarlet

shades shone on spotless damask and glittered in tiny points of ruby fire on the silver and cut glass. Beyond the oval table the room was shrouded in deep shadow, in which the figures of the three men who had pushed back their chairs loomed indistinctly. Being alone, they had not bothered to dress, and their easy fitting tweeds added a note of solid comfort to the luxurious whole.

They had spent long over the meal, and now the smoke from their cigars hung in thin wreaths above the table on which the tiny coffee-cups and liqueur-glasses showed among the litter of dessert. Conversation had become desultory, and Dartin, as he extinguished his cigar-end in the dregs of his coffee-cup, stifled a yawn.

"I'm afraid you fellows will find it deadly dull here. It's in the evenings that things seem to hang a bit. We've been nearly three hours over dinner—that's all there is to do in the country after dusk. When the last post has come and gone at night I feel cut off from the world until the morning."

Haverton took a sip at his Benedictine.

"There's always billiards, Dartin."

"True, Eddie, as you say, there's always billiards; that's not a bad idea. We'll get along now and knock up a few hundreds—a three-handed game."

But Robert excused himself. He was no hand with the cue, he said; besides, he had had a hard day in town clearing up his work. If his host didn't mind, he would watch the play while he finished his cigar; after that he'd turn in.

When, half an hour later, the solicitor was shown to his room, he left Dartin and Haverton warming up to their game. He was feeling very sleepy; but, once in his room he lit a fresh cigar and sat in the dark by the open window, thinking over and piecing together what he had seen and heard since Dartin met him at Barchester station. He had added nothing tangible to his stock of facts; but, now that he was watching for them, he noticed certain manners of speech, little idioms, which pointed to Dartin being rather a native of London than a Colonial. Robert called to mind the Canadians he had come in contact with, and decided that they had little in common with the master of Adderbury Towers. The Colonial manner he had noticed when Dartin first called upon him seemed now to be entirely absent. Truly, the master of Adderbury Towers had quickly adapted himself to his changed conditions.

If only Robert could find a scrap of evidence that would allow of his taking action! One little look through the drawers of that bureau in

Dartin's study—one letter—one sentence from his lips—

The man by the window broke his meditations and leant suddenly forward in his chair, staring out into the night, listening. Below him, and a little to the left, a window was unhasped and there was a sound as though someone were leaning out to breathe in the fresh air.

"That's better," he heard Haverton say. "I had no idea it was shut."

Then, to the man above, the click of the ivory balls came distinctly and the murmur of the laughter and talk of the players.

Robert felt his heart fail him as he came, at last, face to face with the thing he had set himself to do. The little stone coping which ran along outside his window called to him to avail himself of its friendly shelter and crawl along and listen to the conversation of the men in the billiard-room. It was absurdly easy and the risk of detection practically did not exist. Here to his hand was the chance he had been hoping for.

Eavesdropper—it was a hateful word, but Robert was not going to fight that battle with himself all over again. He stepped out on to the little balcony and leant over the low stone parapet.

It had rained a little while they had been at dinner, and the scented airs of the garden came up to him delightfully fresh and cool. There was no moon; from the wood across the lawn, the trees of which loomed up dimly against the star-lit sky, an owl hooted dismaly. In the distance he could make out the lights of the town. Directly beneath him, Robert could distinguish the wide gravel path which circled the house; on it the light from the billiard-room windows cut three squares of radiance.

The solicitor slipped off his shoes, and, keeping well in the shadows of the eaves and gables, made his way along the little gutter to the spot below which he had heard the unhasping of the window. He had to pass two other windows on his way, but these had their blinds closely drawn and were in darkness; they belonged, doubtless, to rooms in the large house which were not used by the present owner.

And now he had reached the position he desired and could see the top of the frames of the wide-open French windows, and, leaning as far forward as he dared, he braced himself to listen.

At first he could make out nothing definite—the click of the balls, a word here and there evidently relating to the game that was in

progress, sometimes a laugh. He could smell the smoke from the men's cigars, and now and again he heard the hiss of a syphon.

As his ear became attuned, however, he began to make out sentences, but it was not until he heard the cues being placed in the rack that he was rewarded with anything that helped the matter which was filling his mind.

Dartin and Haverton, their game ended, had evidently drawn their chairs near to the air of the open windows, and now that the sounds of the play had ceased, their voices rose distinctly to the ears of the listener on the little balcony. He heard one of the men step out on to the gravelled path, the shadow giving him warning and enabling him to dip down behind the stone coping. The man—Robert did not know which of them it was—walked up and down for a moment, possibly to see that the solicitor was in bed. How fortunate it was that he had not switched on the light in his room.

"—Gone off a lot, Vivian. You used to do those long cannon shots up the table every time. Do you remember that game at the 'Asiatic' with Lieutenant Fenton?"

The men laughed at the recollection.

"I'm afraid, Eddie, that I don't take much interest in the game now—don't need to. I'd

rather have had a hand at poker—and, by-the-by, don't call me Vivian."

"All right, old man. I didn't think of cards, somehow."

Dartin laughed shortly.

"I did, Eddie," he said; "but it seemed too weird altogether—you and I—and a Baxenter!" The speaker seemed to shudder as he spoke.

There was silence for a few moments before Haverton answered.

"I told you your nerve had got rusty," he said at last. "Why can't you forget unpleasant things. Ugh!"—a little shiver—"it's me for my downy couch—what?"

Robert remained motionless till he heard the windows being closed and saw the patches on the path disappear as the lights were switched off; then in a moment he regained his room. He heard the others come up the stairs and separate with mutual wishes for good repose, then quietude settled down over the big house.

Robert wished that he could, then and there, take notes of what he had heard and link them up with the other facts in what he called the "Dartin dossier." But it would not do to put on the light in his room, and he must possess himself in what patience he might until the morning.

Tired as he was, he slept but little, and the first glimmer of dawn found him awake. He put on a few clothes, and, taking his writing-case to the window, began his task. He wrote for perhaps a quarter of an hour, pausing often and looking out over the countryside, rosy with the coming day, his brows crumpled with thought. And then he leant back at last and read what he had written :

- “ *Item* : That H (who apparently has met D but lately) shows an intimate knowledge of D’s billiard-playing, D having shown ability in the past with long cannons.
- “ *Item* : That D objects to being addressed as ‘ Vivian.’
- “ *Item* : That for some reason it is a matter of significance that D and H should hesitate to play cards with a Baxenter.
- “ *Item* : That D’s nerves are not what they were, and that he is advised by H to forget some unpleasant occurrence.”

There was enough in all this to dispel any qualms that Robert may still have had as to his course of action. He took paper and envelope from his case and wrote a letter. It was addressed to Mr Silas Berwick, at an address

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in Shaftesbury Avenue, and requested Mr Berwick to call upon the writer at his Strand office at twelve noon on the following Monday, as there was a matter toward, in which his knowledge of criminals and the ways of criminals would prove very useful.

CHAPTER VI

THE OWNER OF THE TOWERS SMELLS A RAT

THE time between tea and the dressing-bell was usually spent by those staying at the Towers in attending to their correspondence, enabling them to avail themselves of the post-basket on the table in the hall, with the contents of which John the groom cycled into Barchester in time to catch the up mail from Birmingham which passed through at nine o'clock.

The letter which Robert had written in the early morning he had posted with his own hands at the little High Street office as they passed through the town on their way to the Mayfield golf-links the day before. There was a small nine-hole course at Barchester, but Dartin had not considered it wise to risk the snub which might follow an application to enter the select membership of the Barcastrian club.

The links at Mayfield, after all, appealed far more to Mr Baptiste Dartin and those who

visited the towers than, as he expressed it, the "potty" Barchester course, and the society to be met with in the club-house of the larger place, consisting as it did of well-to-do Mayfield residents with a sprinkling of racing men, whose bank-books carried infinitely more weight than Debrett, suited his tastes admirably. And so, much to Robert's relief, the letter he had written to Mr Silas Berwick had escaped the scrutiny of prying eyes that would probably have been its fate had it been placed with the other correspondence in the hall.

He had been in the library since six o'clock, engaged in writing one or two business letters of minor importance and a long screed to Stella. Now these were sealed and stamped, and Robert crossed the hall to drop them among those already in the basket. As he stretched out his hand he gave a little gasp and stood as though carved in stone, his eyes fixed and staring down at an envelope on the top of the little heap. Behind him, the drawing-room door opened a little way, then shut to again softly, finally stopping a few inches ajar.

Robert turned slowly, and gave a searching glance to right and left as he unbuttoned his coat and took out his pocket-case. His fingers

trembled a little as he slipped off the elastic band and drew out the scrap of paper which Cantle had picked up in the room in Mortimer Terrace.

He took out the envelope from the basket and walked with it to the light that came through the open doorway, comparing the handwriting of the superscription with that on the piece of paper from his pocket-case. A casual glance had told him that the calligraphy was similar, and now, as he carefully compared the formation of the letters and numerals, conviction grew until it became a certainty.

Dartin's handwriting he knew well — Haverton had been the only other person who had been writing in the library that afternoon, and Robert said that his quest was ended, that he asked for no further proof than this. He knew now, as sure as though it had been told him, that he was in the house with the men who had caused his cousin's death. The mystery of old Adam's document was a mystery no longer, and the whole conspiracy appeared clearly to the understanding.

He stood there in the hall, his hands clenched over the envelope and the scrap of evidence, and asked himself bitterly how he was to get through

the remaining hours, how he was to sit at dinner, to take hospitality from the hands red with poor Hubert's blood.

The thought came to him that he might make some excuse and catch the evening train to London, but he saw that there was no time to do so without appearing strange and attracting that attention to himself that wiser counsels told him was not advisable. As he stood there, the groom entered and, tipping the contents of the basket into a leather satchel, passed out to his bicycle. Robert had had no intention of retaining Haverton's letter, but as the man entered, he had crushed it up, together with the other paper, and thrust it into his pocket; it was out of the question to replace it in the now empty basket. He turned and went slowly up to his room to dress.

The dinner that evening was to be of a more formal character than that of the previous night, and Robert was glad that they would not be alone. For the colonel of intemperate habits had accepted, and one or two other men would be there. It would be something to have those others to talk to; the time would pass more rapidly and the horror of his ordeal be lightened.

He took his writing-case from his kit-bag and added the all-important item relating to the

handwriting. He told himself that he would not look further than this—that he had accumulated ample facts to put before Mr Berwick, the private investigator whose services had so often been used by the firm of Baxenter when their work had taken them into the fields of criminal activity.

Dinner would not be served until eight o'clock—the solicitor welcomed the short respite from the hateful presence of the scoundrels downstairs. He began to dress leisurely, hoping that, by the time he was ready, one or two of the others would have arrived. He felt a little annoyed that he had been forced to retain the letter addressed by Haverton. Its non-arrival at its destination might set the men on the watch before his plans had arrived at fruition. He smoothed the envelope out and put it in the pocket of his dinner-jacket, together with the scrap that now had assumed such importance to his case. His window commanded a view of the entrance-gates, and when Robert was dressed, he pulled up a chair, and, lighting a cigarette, watched for the arrival of the guests.

Meanwhile, in Dartin's little study, a dramatic scene might have been witnessed. The master of the house, pale but composed, sat at his desk, his hands clasping the arms of his chair so that

the knuckles stood out, little patches of white skin. Before him, and far less at his ease, Haverton paced up and down the square of carpet. Now and again he would pass his handkerchief with a nervous gesture across his forehead, and glance anxiously at the man in the chair.

Dartin ran his tongue over his dry lips.

"You saw him, you say, Eddie, deliberately steal your letter?"

"No, I don't say that, Vivian. I don't think for one moment that he meant to take it; he had it in his hand when John came in, and he was taken by surprise and slipped it into his pocket. Perhaps there's nothing in it, after all. But I don't like Baxenter; he has a way of looking at one that makes you want to ask him what he means—if one only dared."

The speaker crossed over to the sideboard and busied himself with a tantalus. "Have one, Vivian?" he asked.

"Not now. What could he want with your correspondence, anyway? Who was the letter to?"

"Only my tailor, Vivian; that's what makes it so strange. Heaven knows what interest it could have for him! He took it over to the light and compared it with a small square of paper he took out of his pocket-book; I was

watching him from the drawing-room door. It was the look on his face that frightened me. I wasn't near enough to see what was on the paper; it was nearly square — folded this size."

Eddie tore out a leaf from a magazine that lay on the desk and nervously folded it twice. As he held it out, it slipped from his trembling hands and fluttered to the floor, and Dartin, as his eyes followed it, stifled back a hoarse cry that rose to his lips. For the paper had fallen beneath a chair—and memories flooded in upon the man at the sight.

Through a mist he seemed to see the furnishings of that fatal room in Mortimer Terrace. Just so had he dropped a square of paper, the ruse that was to lead poor Hubert Baxenter to his death. Through the haze the little square of white seemed to stand out with an amazing clearness. In Dartin's ears were the sounds that had risen to him as he had stood on the grey roof beside the huddled body of his victim—the murmur of London life awakening and the crying of the beasts in the Zoological Gardens. For the second time since he had left the house in the terrace, the mental picture of it filled his vision. The little study seemed to grow darker, and the silver clock on his desk cut the air solemnly

with its *tick-tack-mur-der-tick-tack!* The sunlight that was flooding the lawns outside the window darkened, and Dartin breathed again the foul air of the shut-up house of death.

He pulled himself together with an effort, and reached out his hand for the drink Eddie had mixed and was holding out for him, and which he had but a moment before refused. As he gulped down the liquor, Haverton crossed over to the door and turned the key in the lock.

"And now, Vivian," he said, as he came back, "what is it all about? Is there anything wrong, really, or is it our nerves? What is it?"

"Only"—Dartin was speaking slowly and with meaning—"that we must see to-night what is in Baxenter's pocket-book, must find out just how much he knows. Then we will decide how to deal with him."

"Deal with him—you mean—I'll have no more killing, I—"

Dartin turned fiercely upon the trembling man.

"Who spoke of killing, you fool? Leave him to me. Whose nerves are rusty now, eh? Get upstairs and dress; let him see nothing; he must not guess that we are on to his game. I'll come

and see you in your room before we go down. It'll be all right."

But when Eddie had left the room, Dartin sank back in his chair and stared out over the sunlit garden, a prey to the gloomiest thoughts. Like all men who live by their wits, he was a mass of superstition, and he told himself that it was no accident that the scrap of paper had fallen as it had. That it conveyed a warning he did not for a moment question, and he knew that at last a net was closing round him. He had let the paper rest where it had fallen, and now he reached down and picked it up, tearing it savagely into minute pieces, as though the innocent page of magazine advertisements were in itself a menace.

For the first few months after the crime in Mortimer Terrace he had been worried by his failure to locate the paper he had used as a decoy. It contained, as he knew, only a few words and figures, notes of a game he and Haverton had played with a youth whom they had enticed into a Soho gambling-hell, was, in fact, part of a record of their division of the spoil they had taken from their pigeon. He did not for a moment think that there was any identifying importance to it, but it haunted him.

Then as day followed day, and weeks grew

into months and no mention was made in the press of its discovery, he put it from his mind, telling himself that in those hours he had spent in the darkened room, the memory of which was now blurred and indistinct, he must have destroyed it. He did not remember having done so, but it was hardly likely he would have passed it over. This conviction grew upon him as time passed, until he accepted it as a certainty, and it was a rude awakening that Mr Baptiste Dartin had received this summer afternoon.

He glanced at the clock on the desk. He must compose himself and prepare to receive his guests. He knew by late experience that his nerve had, as it were, gone out of training, and there was an evening before him in which his nerve would be taxed to the uttermost.

In half an hour Robert Baxenter would be waiting in the library with the other guests, and he must not be allowed to suspect anything. Everything must appear to be as it was before Eddie had happened so opportunely upon Robert in the hall, and had witnessed the episode of the letter-basket.

Before he left the room, Dartin unlocked a drawer at the back of the desk, and, reaching far in, drew out a little tin case. He opened this

and selected a small phial of blue glass, and carefully reading what was on the label, uncorked it and tipped out two tiny grey tabloids, which he dropped carefully into his waistcoat pocket.

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CHAPTER VII

DRUGGED !

DEBONNAIR as ever, and with no shadow of difference in his manner, Dartin stood in the library to receive his guests; and as Robert Baxenter entered, he looked up and smiled at him over the cocktail he was mixing for the colonel of intemperate habits, who, newly arrived, stood in an anticipatory attitude at his elbow.

"Colonel Purdon — Mr Robert Baxenter," and, as the men bowed, "let me mix you one of these, Baxenter; I learnt the knack in Canada."

There was no tremor about the hand of the master of Adderbury Towers as he deftly concocted the insidious appetiser, although he told himself that this was probably the last time he would dispense hospitality among these luxurious surroundings.

But Vivian's life had developed to the full the fatalist in him, and living, as such men do, on

the edge of an eternal volcano, he was ever in readiness for eventualities and prepared to face them. The knowledge he had gained this afternoon was priceless in that it gave him the start of his adversaries. If he must be a fugitive, he would at least be a wealthy one, and he would be far away before the hue and cry was raised against him—he would make quite sure of that.

At the dinner-table he was the life of the little party; his fund of anecdote, his gift of repartee, had never been used to greater advantage, and seldom had host presided over a more sumptuous or well-ordered meal. Even Robert, under the influences of the mellow vintages, found himself taking a reluctant pleasure in the repast.

The two young men from Barchester, who were of the party, frankly enjoyed themselves. They were decent enough fellows in their way, with little to speak of but country pursuits; while Colonel Purdon was content to listen—provided always that his glass was kept replenished.

Haverton alone seemed to have changed. There was less colour in the heavy cheeks, and his merriment, forced and intermittent, was punctuated at intervals by little spells of moody silence, when he would sit absently twisting the

stem of his wine-glass or nervously crumpling the bread on the tablecloth before him.

As on the previous night, they sat late over their coffee and cigars, and, as before, billiards followed dinner. It was midnight before the old colonel was helped into his coat and delivered over to the care of John to escort to his home.

As, a little later, the Barchester men rose to take their departure, Dartin made a sign to Eddie that he should accompany them to the door. He himself waited behind for a moment to light his cigar; then, passing at the back of the little table near which Robert was standing, deftly passed his hand over the solicitor's tumbler and hurried into the hall after Eddie and his guests.

Robert Baxenter, left alone, tossed off the remainder of his whisky-and-soda and threw his cigar-end away preparatory to bidding his host good night. He did not relish spending longer with his enemies—the night had passed quicker than he had thought. What a long time they were. He would go to bed. Why, what was this?—

He raised a trembling hand to his forehead. The room spun wildly—the pictures joined the furniture in a fantastic dance—the green cloth of the billiard-table seemed to sway and glide beneath his feet.

And, spinning dizzily on his heel, Robert Baxenter fell heavily and lay huddled upon the rug before the fireplace.

The sound of the big front door closing behind the departing guests sounded through the quiet hall, and Haverton turned and faced Dartin.

"And now," he said, "for the ordeal."

Dartin laughed unpleasantly.

"Not necessary. I think, Eddie, my boy, that Mr Robert Baxenter won't cause us any great inconvenience—wait." The speaker tiptoed back along the hall and stood peering through the crack of the billiard-room door. "Come," he added, and beckoned to Haverton; "friend Robert is dead in this act."

The two men entered the room and stood looking down at the silent figure on the hearth-rug. The younger man was murmuring to himself, "It was a white rug last time."

Eddie Haverton looked up sharply.

"What's that you're muttering there to yourself, man—what does this mean?—he's not—not—"

"Dead? lord! no. It means that you and I, being in the same boat, must set a course for harbourage. This," and Dartin touched the figure with his foot, "is better like this

while we are thinking out our plans, what we are to do with ourselves—and with him. Sit down over there, Eddie."

The master of Adderbury Towers went round the table and pulled the blinds over the three windows looking out on to the garden. He then left the room, and Eddie could hear him calling to some servant. He turned his back on the form by the fireplace, and, when Dartin re-entered the room, locking the door behind him, he found the man busy with the whisky and syphon. It did not take a very keen observer to see that the nerves of Mr Eddie Haverton were a-jangle.

"Now," began Dartin, "we'll be undisturbed and can take our time; he'll be like that for twenty-four hours at the least."

He dropped down on one knee before the prostrate figure and ran practised fingers over his clothes, bringing to light almost immediately the crumpled letter to Eddie's tailor and—

As Dartin's eye fell upon the scrap of paper with it, he knew that he had indeed come to the end of his tether, and that the presentiment which had come to him in his study was fully justified. He looked up with a faint smile on his white face.

"Here, Eddie," he said, "this belongs to you, I think. Lord! what an age ago it seems since

we played that game in that baccarat joint in Soho. That," and he pointed to the little piece of paper, "was my one mistake, and, as usual, the one mistake has come home to roost. We've got to get out of this, Eddie—what a pity it's in *your* writing."

The other did not answer, he just sat down and gazed at the scrawled words and numerals, with pendulous lip and with hands that trembled pitifully. When Dartin spoke again a decisive note had come into his voice, and Eddie felt that he was again listening to the Vivian Renton of other days.

"This man here must never tell his tale. You hear me, Haverton—must—never—tell—his—tale. He knows everything and——"

But the other was on his feet at this, speaking with sudden energy.

"I'll have no more murder—no more murder ! It's too horrible ! One's enough——"

Dartin's eyes glinted dangerously.

"You'll have what I say—it's his life or ours ! "

"Ours?" Eddie's voice was a falsetto, "*yours*, you mean. My hands are clean—I didn't go back to the house that night—I——"

Dartin lit a cigarette and looked oddly through the blue smoke at his companion.

"As I remarked just now, Eddie, what a pity it's in your handwriting."

The scrap of paper had fluttered to the floor, and Eddie looked at it as Darton went on.

"Besides — I don't intend to kill friend Robert. I am not the one to put a noose round my neck—*our* necks. It seems to me that the other affair doesn't count for anything now. That paper is the only evidence and it's easily destroyed. I never meant to kill that man—oh, you may as well know it all, it was an accident, not murder."

"Seems to me it was a pretty good imitation."

"Never mind what it seems, Eddie; I'll explain one of these days, if you care to listen. Meanwhile, we've got to be out of here by Tuesday. Evidence or no evidence, Baxenter knows the truth and we would never be safe in England, although without this bit of paper I don't quite see what he can do. Again, it's out of the question to think of killing him—his friends know he is visiting here. It means a bolt, Eddie—an undignified exit for us.—I've never shown you the cellars of the Towers, have I?"

He took Haverton's arm and led him from the room, re-locking the door behind them. From an archway at the back of the hall a flight of broad stone steps wound down to the kitchens. At the foot of these Darton struck a match

and lit the candle in a lantern which he took down from a hook on the great dresser.

They crossed the main kitchen, with its shining brass and pewter, and passed through the big sculleries and stone-flagged bakehouse, stopping at last before a door set in an alcove in the further wall. There was a key in the lock, and Dartin, turning it, pushed open the door on its creaking hinges. Then more steps, and the men were standing in the cool dampness of the cellars of Adderbury Towns.

Dartin held the lantern up above his head, and the yellow light flickered on the low, groined roof and on the worn and stained pillars which supported it. A great rat came from beneath a pile of old casks and scampered away between Eddie's feet; he gave a little gasp of horror as he felt the gross, heavy body of it through his thin dress shoes, then hurried after his guide, who was making his way through one of the dark arches.

For perhaps a hundred paces they went on in silence, taking little turns here and there, until they came to what was apparently the last cellar, for Eddie could make out no doorway except that by which they had entered.

There was little need for Dartin to say why he had brought Eddie here. The spot was an ideal one. Here a man would lie hidden until

a really strict search was made. This would give the men ample time ; for, if due precautions were taken, it was not likely that Baxenter's friends would think seriously of his non-appearance for some days, when it would be too late for the young solicitor to work them any harm.

They made many journeys to and fro between the cellar and the house, carrying a few things with which to make their prisoner as comfortable as possible, consistent with their own safety. A rough bed was made up in one corner ; and provisions, water, and candles to last some days were placed on the floor beside it.

Between them, they carried the unconscious form of their guest to his new quarters. It seemed to the younger man as he looked on the set white face with the closed eyes that Robert had suddenly taken on a great resemblance to his dead cousin. There was the same shapely forehead showing as the head hung limply back, the same sensitive mouth and nostrils. Dartin wondered how it was he had never noticed these things before.

It was not easy—for, unlike Hubert, Robert was a big man—for them to make the journey, encumbered as they were by the lantern ; but at last it was ended and the drugged man lay

stretched out upon the pile of rugs which formed the bed.

Dartin placed a hand over the heart and bent his ear to the still lips. Then, with a reassuring nod to Eddie that all was right, the man made his prisoner fast with cords he had cut from the blinds of the billiard-room window, tying skilful knots which allowed a certain amount of play to the limbs, but which Dartin knew by experience allowed no loophole of escape.

And so they left him—and, in a little bedroom in Maida Vale, a girl smiled in her sleep as she dreamt of the morrow which would bring her lover back to her.

CHAPTER VIII

ESCAPE

ROBERT BAXENTER'S senses returned to him, slowly at first, then with a rush of memories to his throbbing head. Around him the earthy smell of a vault, and on the floor a candle in an old lantern was flickering to extinction.

With an effort, he so moved his cramped limbs that he could turn and raise himself upon his elbow. The movement, slight as it was, proved almost too much for him. Little points of fire danced and shot before his eyes, and he felt as though his brain were molten metal. But he gritted his teeth and waited motionless until, little by little, the pain passed from him.

He looked at his bonds, and marvelled at the ingenuity which allowed him the limited use of his hands and legs whilst making, as he saw at a glance, release impossible. There was a carafe of water at his elbow, and he held out his bound hands towards it. Then,

before he touched it, he drew them back and, taking his eyes from the carafe, peered hard into the gloom around him. For the surface of the water was agitated, and Robert knew that the carafe must have been touched within the last few moments. He lay quite motionless, letting his eyes roam from side to side, searching the darkness between the stone pillars.

"Come out, whoever's there!"

His voice sounded harsh and strange to the young solicitor, and it echoed dismally through the arched roof of the doorway. He waited silently, but there was no reply.

"Is that you, Dartin?—I'm waiting. You needn't be frightened to come out."

The master of Adderbury Towers came slowly round the angle of the door and seated himself on a chair a few feet from his prisoner. He was putting a brave front on things, and rather overdid the effort to appear at his ease. He was smoking a cigarette, and, as he listened to Robert, he kept his eyes fixed on the glowing end.

"So it is you—this seems a strange way to treat a guest. Let me see, I was your guest, wasn't I?"

Dartin nodded.

"And you are now, Mr Baxenter; your room

has been changed, that's all. Believe me, it is no wish of mine that you should be here. I am only sorry for the necessity. I own but one master in this world, Mr Baxenter, and that is 'circumstance.'

Robert leant back wearily on the pile of rugs. He was feeling a good deal of pain from lying in his cramped position, but he did not intend that his enemy should have the satisfaction of seeing his sufferings.

"I suppose, Mr Dartin, that there is not the least use in my blustering and swearing vengeance — no doubt you have arranged matters to make that quite useless. Do you know, I've always had a sneaking regard for your particular class of scoundrel. You're so complete."

Dartin made a gesture of impatience and rose from his chair. The other smiled at his annoyance and went on :

"Don't lose your temper, Dartin ; if anybody ought to do that, it's I, surely. The game's yours—so far. I always fight to the last, and then see what terms I can make. It seems it's come to this now. What is it you want with me—money ?"

There was a short laugh from Dartin at this, as he re-seated himself and lit a fresh cigarette.

"Hardly," he said. "I think, Mr Baxenter, that I could buy you up and a few more like you. No, it's not money."

He paused a moment as though he expected a question from the man on the rugs, then he went on :

"My terms, since you are good enough to mention them, are easy. I want you to remain here for three days. This is Monday. I have made arrangements for a letter to be posted from Manchester on Wednesday evening, acquainting your firm with your whereabouts. That will be Thursday afternoon, at least, before you can be found. That will give us ample time—Haverton and I cross the Channel to-night. You see, Mr Baxenter, I have read your notes, and really you have worked up your case well—too well for your health, in fact. I am simply making it sure that you are powerless to harm us until we are out of the country. I don't think it'll be worth your while to follow us."

"And you are the murderer of my poor cousin!"

For the first time Dartin let his eyes rest on his prisoner's face.

"Ah! there, Mr Baxenter, you must believe my word. It was an accident—but, I'm afraid, a criminal one. I have done most things in

my life, but never wilfully killed a man. Why don't I kill you now if I am a murderer? Dead men's tales, you know!"

"I expect Mr Dartin has some very excellent reason why he should not do so. It suits your book, I presume. I wouldn't have thought that a murder more or less would have worried you. After all, they can only hang a man once."

Dartin looked at his watch.

"You can believe me or not, as you will, but I have never ceased to regret your cousin's death, and I rather welcome this opportunity of explaining matters. I have put the memory from me as far as I can, but I would give all I possess to call him back. That's God's truth, Baxenter."

A step sounded beyond the doorway and Haverton's voice calling, and so, without another word, Dartin lit a fresh candle in the lantern and left the cellar, locking the door on the outside.

Baxenter lay still, ruminating over what he had heard. Thursday—that was a full seventy hours of this torture. He thought of Stella and what she would suffer. Perhaps, not hearing from him, she would call at the office—she knew where he had spent the weekend—might they not institute a search? He

knew that the girl was leaving by an afternoon train to Cardiff to join the company, and he had promised to call on her before she left. She would hardly have time, after all, to visit the office.

Then he asked himself whether he was still at Adderbury Towers. Was it not just as likely that the two scoundrels had moved him during his insensibility to some other hiding-place? All he could be certain of was that he was in a cellar, and that it was not intended he should leave it before Thursday.

He had listened to Dartin's footsteps as they had died away on the stone floor, had heard whisperings as he spoke to Haverton, then had fallen this dense silence. It was the silence that he saw was to be his greatest trial in the hours to come. Oppressive as it was, he felt powerless to break it himself; but could only lie there and listen, as one does when lying awake of a night, for the sounds which do not come.

The candle burnt steadily, and threw out patches of ochre light, through the panes of the lantern, on to the flags of the floor. He estimated that it would take perhaps six hours for it to burn itself out, and he did not care to dwell on what his situation would be then. His bonds just allowed him

to reach the water and biscuits beside him, but any big movement was denied him—the cords which bound his feet being in some manner, which he could not see, made fast to the floor.

He refreshed himself with a few of the hard biscuits and a draught of water, then fell again to his strained listening. Hour followed hour—or were they minutes that were passing with such leaden feet? Steadily he watched the candle burn lower and lower, and so at last fell asleep.

When he woke again he was in darkness, and now the silence seemed the harder to bear, and was broken at long intervals by trivial sounds which Robert named for rats. Doubtless, the animals had been held in check by the light and were now advancing on his stock of biscuits. He made a movement, and heard their scurrying feet as they scampered across the cellar floor. Then they became bolder, and the man felt one great fellow as he ran across his ankles.

He called out at the horror of the thing, and the echoes took his cry and sported with it among the arches of the roof, and Robert bit deep into his lip rather than he should cry out again to bring those mocking echo-voices into play.

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And then his attention was taken by a small, vague patch of grey high up in the wall—elusive at first, but gradually growing in brightness until he saw that it came from a small grating let into the wall and evidently on a level with the ground outside, for the man could make out, as the light increased, blades of grass edging their way through the bars.

At the sight new life was born in Robert Baxenter's heart. This poor flicker of daylight, this glimpse that told of the green earth, acted as nothing else could on the spirits of the prisoner. Gone was the fear of darkness, of the silence; gone, too, the dread of the vermin. He lay and gazed at the grating as at a beacon of hope. It was evidently raining outside; he could see the blades of grass shiver as the drops fell on them.

This, he told himself, must be Tuesday, and it passed at length. Robert watched with regret while the friendly grating faded into the darkness. Apparently it faced the west, for the rays of the late sun shone almost horizontally into the cellar and cut red devices on the opposite wall. These rose higher and higher, and then they were gone; and the patch of the grating changed to purple, to darker purple, until at last it lost its shape

and eternal blackness seemed to fall on the man's soul.

Robert had purposely fought off all inclination to sleep during the hours of light, and was rewarded by falling into a dreamless sleep shortly after night fell. It was still dark, however, when he awoke, and, as is often the case, his wits were preternaturally sharpened in those intense hours which precede the dawn, for he thought he saw a way of escape.

Dartin had been clever indeed, but Robert smiled as he thought that there are none of us infallible. The man had moved the lantern out of Robert's reach, thinking, no doubt, that with the flame of the candle the prisoner could burn his cords. But he had not taken into account the carafe of water. What, Robert asked himself, was to prevent his breaking this, and, with a piece of the glass between his teeth, working at the cords which bound his wrists?

Impatiently he waited for daybreak, and when at last his friend the grating greeted him, he put his plan into effect. With the caution for which the young solicitor was noted, he drank off the remaining drop of water so that it should not be wasted; then, raising the carafe, tapped it lightly on the stone floor. By this

method he was able to break it into fairly large pieces, and to prevent them from scattering. He put the largest between his teeth and commenced operations.

It was slow work, and difficult to obtain a purchase strong enough on the oddly shaped and brittle glass; time and time again they broke, but perseverance gained the day. In a little while his hands were free and he could use the glass upon the cords which bound his legs. It was quicker work now, and, by the time it was full day, Robert stood free to move about. He felt very weak, and he was bleeding from some nasty cuts in his lips, but his strength came back to him with the hope that was in his heart.

Escape, however, was not an accomplished fact. The door leading out of the cellar was locked, and the grating was barely large enough to let a cat through. He stood upon the chair which Dartin had brought down for his own use and was able to bring his eyes to the level of the bars.

There had again been rain in the night, and the morning had broken dull and cheerless and the leaden sky seemed destitute of promise. To his left he could make out the lower bricks in a creeper-covered wall, and before him a few tree trunks, old and lichen

patched. Between them he could see a kitchen-garden, with its rows of pea-sticks and a partly dug over potato patch, in the ground of which was a long-handled spade. The garden appeared to have been well tended, and a basket lay on the ground between the pea-rows. It seemed certain to the man behind the grating that the house in which he was had been recently occupied.

But now there was no sound save the ripple of water in some gutter, and the patter of rain-drops shaken by the wind from the trees. The garden was as deserted and silent as the house evidently was, and Robert commenced his attack upon the door regardless of the noise he made.

For over an hour he worked at the lock, using as a tool his pocket-knife, with which he whittled away the wood surrounding it until, striking on a hidden nail, the blade snapped off close to the handle. It was the square-ended appearance of the broken blade that suggested to Robert that he might be more successful using it as a screw-driver to take out the screws of the hinges. This proved to be a much simpler affair than his assault on the lock, but, even then, the work was tedious and slow; it was near midday before the door was hingeless.

The man levered with the handle of his

knife until he obtained a finger-hold, then, exerting all his strength, he pulled, straining until at last the lock-fastenings, already weakened by Robert's early efforts, could no longer stand the pressure and parted, and, with a splintering of wood and a smother of dust, the door fell in.

Robert stepped over it and groped his way along the passage, which showed before him in the dim light which came through the grating. Then, at the first turn, he was plunged into inky blackness, and he had to proceed more cautiously. He felt in his pockets, but his match-box had evidently been taken from him, or he had left it in the billiard-room, and he had to feel his way with outstretched hands, one touching the wall as a guide, the other held out at arm's length before him.

The time seemed endless, until at last he made out a patch of diffused light, to which he groped his way. He found it to be the open door leading into the scullery, which Dartin had left ajar, perhaps by design, to assist the people who would come searching for the solicitor on Thursday.

The weather had evidently taken a turn for the better whilst Robert had been at work on the door, and he reeled a little and put a hand over his eyes as he came into the strong sun-

light which was pouring in at the big kitchen windows ; then he crossed the room to the stairs and ascended to the floor above.

It came as no surprise to him that he was still in Adderbury Towers ; he had not thought it likely that his enemies would have given themselves the trouble, or taken the risk of his removal. He threw open the great front door and stood in the porch, drawing in great breaths of the summer air. The relief from the oppression of the shut-up house was very grateful ; and the man felt his strength returning to him, and, with it, the recollection that he had not eaten a solid meal since dinner on Sunday evening.

He treated the dining-room as he had the hall, drawing up the blinds and pushing open the French windows. The sunlight showed him the room as he had last seen it—the oval table still strewn with the litter of Sunday night's feast, the chairs pushed back as the diners had left them when they rose. Serviettes lay crumpled among the nutshells and cigar-ash, and in some of the glasses there still remained a little wine. Before the colonel's place was a litter of wooden matches, where the befuddled old gentleman had tried to show them some absurd trick.

The hungry man drew a chair up to the table

and investigated. There was not much that a man might eat who had practically starved for three days. Sweet biscuits, chocolates, and preserved ginger and fruits were hardly the fare for which Robert was looking, neither was his thirst to be slaked with Chartreuse or Kummel. And then he remembered that on his way through the kitchen he had seen a butler's tray containing what had been removed from the earlier courses of the banquet, and, taking a knife with him, he descended the stairs. He saw now that the kitchen was littered with the remains of cooking, and he told himself that not only the master, but the servants of Adderbury Towers had left their posts at very short notice.

There was plenty on the butler's tray to stay Robert's appetite, the remains of a cold chicken, some salmon, and bread and cheese. As he sat on the corner of the table, enjoying his impromptu feast, he saw for the first time the state he was in. The square mirror tilted over the mantelpiece above the range showed him the figure of a young man, indescribably dirty, and with chin and lips scored with cuts on which the blood had dried in ugly little brown patches.

His evening dress, torn and stained with plaster and cobwebs, would have disgraced a

scarecrow. On his fashionable soft-fronted shirt the blood had dripped from his chin, and he was without collar or tie. Evidently his jailors had mercifully removed them. Robert paused in the act of eating and reviewed himself.

"I think, Robert," and he nodded to his reflection, "a bath is what you want—and a three days' growth of beard does not suit your particular type of manly beauty."

He slipped off the kitchen table and returned to the dining-room, where he opened a bottle of Moselle. New life seemed to flow in his veins as he drained a glass of the sparkling beverage. Then, entirely refreshed he set about making a search of the premises. He chose Dartin's study first as being the room most likely to yield any information that might be useful to him. Here, as elsewhere, were signs of a hurried evacuation. The drawers of the desk had been ransacked, and in the wide hearth a tall heap of ashes showed how the late owner of the Towers had spent his last hours under its roof. Robert paid no even glance through the papers in the drawers; he knew too well that such incriminating documents would have been snatched or carried away.

The windows of the room were close shut and curtained, and two candles, which had

stood on the table, had burnt completely out. The air was acrid from tobacco smoke and the smell of charred paper. Evidently the men had stayed long at their work of destruction. There were glasses and a half-empty whisky bottle on the desk, and the little silver clock had stopped at a few minutes after ten.

The other rooms Robert did not worry about. Falling on his knees, he carefully sifted over the coals in the grate, blowing upon them gently with a pair of brass bellows that he had found in the same place. The black, charred paper scattered to left and right, leaving those which had in part escaped the flames. There were not many of these—Dartin had done his work too well for that—but such as they were, the solicitor placed them carefully in an envelope to examine on his return to town. The words written on the scraps of paper were in French and English, but to Robert's casual glance they afforded no light on the secret of the Chauville inheritance.

It was a telegram which he found screwed into a ball and tossed into the waste-paper basket that decided him to lose no time in reaching London. It was addressed to him and was from Cantle, dated the previous afternoon, and asking why he had not returned. Robert

wondered what lies Dartin had made up about him and what excuse they had sent in reply to the wire.

Stella, too, would be anxious, and with this thought the solicitor turned to the time-table on the desk. There was a train which left Barchester at three-thirty that would just give him time to bathe, and change, and walk down to the town.

He never forgot the luxury of the next half-hour, the cold lave of the water of his bath and the clean comfort of the shave. His kit-bag had been rifled, but his clothing was intact; he missed only his writing-case with the "Dartin dossier," and Robert smiled as he thought what pleasant reading it had made for the finders. The damage to his chin was slighter than the bloodstained first view had led him to believe, and, as he stood in a suit of grey flannel before the pier-glass in the bath-room, there was little to point to his having passed through any adventure or experience such as his imprisonment in the cellars.

He packed all of his clothes and possessions into his bag, with the exception of the dress suit and the linen he had worn in the cellar. He glanced at the clock as he passed through the hall and found that he had barely time for the train, as it was, and snatching up his cap,

he hurried down the gravelled drive to the lodge gates. Everywhere was desolation ; there were no servants to be seen, from the stables came no sound of life, and the lodge was as silent and deserted as the house.

How quickly Dartin had moved in the matter when once he had seen that the game was up ! Robert almost felt an admiration for the man who could so quickly and thoroughly adapt himself to changed conditions. He felt a distinct satisfaction that Dartin had elected not to kill him when he had him in his power, but the elation he experienced at having unmasked the man who had caused his cousin's death, was tempered with the thought of those hours in the cellar, the indignity of his cords, and the cool insolence of Baptiste Dartin.

Full of his thoughts, Robert, on reaching the outskirts of the town, took the wrong road, and the time he lost recovering his bearings made it impossible for him to catch the train. By the time he reached the cathedral, the great clock was showing the half-hour, and from the distant station the whistle of the engine came clearly through the afternoon calm.

Robert slackened speed and looked around him. A little down the road, the oak-timbered archway of the "Crown" yawned invitingly. The sun was hot, and, after all, there were

worse places in which to consult a time-table than the dim coolness of the panelled smoke-room. He stopped at the Post Office and sent a wire to the theatre at Cardiff, a message that would still any fears Stella might feel for him.

There was only one other occupant of the room when the solicitor entered it and took from the hook the local time-table. He crossed to a table by the window, and, ordering tea, looked up his train. To his annoyance he found that there was none until eight o'clock, and then only a local which took some two hours and a half to reach the Metropolis.

Perhaps a little of his annoyance showed in his face, for the man at the next table leant over to him.

"You'll excuse me, sir; perhaps I can help you—I saw you looking at the London trains."

Robert turned to him with a smile.

"Yes, I've just managed to miss the three-thirty—I see the next is eight—and that's a rotter."

"Oh! we're not served very well at Barchester. You'll be quicker driving over to Mayfield if you're in a hurry—that's on the main line; you'll find there's a train nearly every hour."

Baxenter thanked his informant, and whilst he waited for his tea they fell into conversation, in the course of which the solicitor mentioned his visit to the Towers, thinking perhaps to elicit a little useful information from one who was evidently well acquainted with Barchester and Barcastrian matters.

The other man was interested immediately.

"You know Mr Dartin, then, s'

"Oh yes; not very well, but—"

"Then perhaps you know wh'v he has hurried off like this? My son, sir, is head-gardener up at the Towers; or, rather, he was, because he's been shot out suddenly. All in a minute, 'Here's two months' money,' Mr Dartin told him; and he did the same to all of them, women as well."

Robert appeared to be mildly interested.

"Then he has closed up the house?"

"Seems so, sir—can't make head or tail of it. They all had to leave, night before last—that is, them as hadn't already left during the day. The carrier went up and shifted their things in a batch. Mr Dartin and another gentleman motored through here shortly afterwards. They say he's sold all his horses to the vet for next to nothing. We'll miss him here in Barchester—an open-handed gentleman, and the life and soul of the market-dinner at the 'Lion'."

And the Barcastrian went off, his head shaking dolefully, leaving Robert to his tea and toast.

The solicitor ordered a cab to be ready in half an hour, and, his tea finished, sat gazing out on to the stable-yard of the "Crown" and listening to the sounds of it, the hissing of the ostler as he rubbed down the horse, his guttural admonishings to the animal as he led him across the cobbles with harness hanging, jingling, and backed him between the shafts of the crazy old landau in which Robert was to make the journey to Mayfield.

Then the ostler, throwing his cap into the harness-room, took down a battered silk hat from its peg and, placing it tenderly on his head, changed from ostler to coachman, and presenting himself at the open window, intimated that all was ready.

But when the express for London left the station at Mayfield, Robert Baxenter was not among the passengers, for events had happened which had considerably altered that gentleman's arrangements. At the time the train left, he was moodily pacing the High Street of the manufacturing town in the vicinity of the Post Office.

Every ten minutes or quarter of an hour

he entered the ugly red-brick building and inquired anxiously if a telegram had arrived for him, and at last his impatience was rewarded. He crossed over to the light that struggled in at the long, dirt-encrusted windows, and eagerly tore open the buff envelope. The message was quite short :

“ Leaving Euston seven, arrive eight-thirty.—
SILAS.”

Robert glanced up at the clock which hung in the centre of the great bare wall, and saw that he had the better part of three hours in which to kick his heels in Mayfield. A warm, drizzling rain had commenced to fall, and he made his way to the comfortable inn in the market-square where he had been deposited by the cab which had conveyed him from Barchester. He drew a chair up close to the old-fashioned bow window and sat looking out through its blurred panes across the deserted square.

At the best of times an unattractive town, it was on this particular evening in its most cheerless mood. The factories, the tall chimney-stacks of which showed above the houses of the market-place, were sending out shrill syren-shrieks to tell their workers that the hour of release had come and that they were free to attend to their personal affairs. Below him

in the street a few miserable figures shuffled past, or from the doorways of the shops opposite, surveyed the weather.

A moment, and the square teemed with life, men and women, stunted and pinched, hurried past, their shoulders bent to snatch such poor shelter as shawls and sacking afforded. Their rough iron-shod shoes made a not unmusical clatter on the wet cobbles.

With the coming of darkness the scene grew more than ever depressing. Little patches of blurred light flickered out from the public-house across the square and the houses surrounding the Town Hall loomed a shapeless mass through the curtain of sooty rain. A clock in the neighbouring street chimed dolefully seven times, and Robert, with a little shiver, rose and pulled down the blind, as though to shut out the scene of sordid squalor.

He rang and ordered a whisky-and-soda, and told himself, when he had finished it, that he felt considerably better. He would take the opportunity of writing to Stella. It was fortunate for her peace of mind and his own independence of action, that the girl was that week playing in the West of England and would not be expecting to see him. Robert hoped that he would be able to see his affair with Dartin through to its con-

clusion without her needing to know or worry her little head about it at all. Any anxiety she may have felt when she did not receive a letter at the theatre would have been dispelled by the telegram he had sent to her on reaching Bar-
chester that afternoon.

At eight o'clock he ordered supper to be served in a private room in an hour, and, dropping Stella's letter in the box as he went through the hall, left the hotel. The rain had now ceased and the streets had taken on a more cheerful appearance, and, as the solicitor made his way down to the station, his spirits rose accordingly.

The train from London was well up to time, and, as it curved into the great junction, Robert made out the figure of Silas Berwick at the window of a first-class smoker and hailed him cordially. The mere sight of his friend gave him new energy in the matter he had in hand, and he remembered the many cases in which the investigator had acted with him with almost invariable success.

Although slightly under the average height, and a little stouter than he cared to be, Silas Berwick gave one at first sight the impression of strength, an impression which grew stronger when one had had time to notice the length of arm, the depth of chest, and the way the short

neck sat on the square shoulders. His face, while pleasing in expression, had no pretence to good looks; the eyes were small and grey, but they shone out merrily beneath the bushy tufts of eyebrow, the heaviness of which was intensified by their being the only hair on his face.

He sprang out with a cheery salutation as he caught sight of the solicitor among the throng on the platform.

"Quick work, Baxenter — now, what's the trouble? No, I haven't any luggage—only this," and he held up his suit-case.

Robert linked his arm affectionately in Berwick's and led him to a cab, and within the half-hour they were sitting down to—and doing full justice to—the excellent supper which the host of the "Three Pigeons" had prepared for them.

As they ate, the solicitor recounted the whole history of the Dartin affair. His companion listened in silence. Robert, as a man of law, was precise and he marshalled his facts plainly, and questions on the part of his hearer were not necessary. He showed him also the few scraps of burnt papers which he had rescued from the fireplace in the study at Adderbury Towers.

The narrative was interrupted by the waiter

clearing the table, and when the coffee and cigars were brought in, and the men were alone again, the solicitor went on :

"I was coming on to London to consult you. I reckoned on your being a bit anxious after my letter."

"I was. I called at the office—Cantle was expecting you and sent a wire to the Towers. I waited for the reply; it was quite satisfactory, and said that you were prolonging your visit. Of course, it doesn't take much intelligence to guess who sent that reply."

Robert Baxenter nodded grimly.

"Hardly, does it? Well, I was saying, I was on my way to London when I ran across a bit of information here that altered the complexion of things a little. The cab I drove over in from Barchester put up here, and I remembered, when I saw the sign-board, that I had called here with Dartin and Haverton when we motored over to golf on Sunday.

"The 'Boots' here evidently has a fine memory and he nodded to me as I entered, and, thinking that perhaps I might improve the occasion, I stopped and chatted with him for a moment. I learnt that the car with the two previous rascals from the Towers had passed through the town on Monday night and had pulled up here. They had had a drink in the bar, and they had

looked at the large road-map in the hall, and one of them had asked how far it was to Doncaster."

"And how far is it?"

Baxenter thought for a moment.

"Seventy miles, I should say—there or thereabouts. I know the car they were using, a great six-cylinder affair; it would eat up that distance in no time. That decided me. As they went north, it seemed a waste of time for me to go south; hence my wire. I'm rather anxious to come to grips with Mr Dartin."

The investigator nodded his approval.

"You did quite right, Baxenter; we're not far behind them now. Just touch that bell, will you, and ask that antiquated waiter to let us see a map."

And, when it was spread out on the table before them:

"Those bits of charred paper you showed me seem to point to France, don't they? I'm afraid they're useless further than that they show us that your man is acquainted with the French language. I expect, when he said to you that they were crossing the Channel, he wasn't far from the truth, only I should say that they altered their plans and chose the North Sea. You see here," and Berwick placed his index-finger on the

map, "either Goole or Hull would suit their purpose.

"Goole is only a few miles off Doncaster, and there are boats going from there to the Dutch ports continually; from any of these they could reach Paris."

"You think they've gone there, then?"

Berwick gave a little laugh and shrugged his shoulders.

"It's a shot in the dark—but it's really surprising how many fugitives make a beeline for that city. Paris and Brighton are the two places I always get into touch with as soon as possible when I am after game like Dartin. There are rookeries enough and to spare in Montmartre and the Quartier. Given a knowledge of the language, there are few better places to hide in than Paris.

"You see, it will take them a little longer, via Holland, and I'll wire through to France to-night, to a friend of mine in the police, to keep an eye on the arrivals. They won't expect anybody on their heels yet."

The two men, having seen to the sending of the telegram, sat late over their cigars, but were early astir the next morning and pursuing their inquiries in the ancient city of Doncaster. The car, by reason of its size, was not hard to trace, and they ran it to

earth in the garage of the "George." The gentlemen who had left it, the proprietor of the hotel informed Baxenter, had expressed their intention of returning for it in a day or two. They had not done so.

The hours spent in Doncaster by the two men, making inquiries, had no result, and later, at Goole and at Hull, their questions received no satisfactory answer. Berwick knew that there were many of the smaller craft which crossed the North Sea which did not officially carry passengers, but he also knew that some captains did not disdain to earn a pound or two did the occasion serve. On the subject, however, they were discreetly quiet.

In this way the best part of two days was wasted, and Berwick began to have doubts as to whether the men they were after had really left the country. It was after midday on Friday when a reply came from Monsieur Brieux, his friend in the Paris force, stating that two arrivals by the Amsterdam train had borne some resemblance to the telegraphed details. M. Brieux added that this was strong enough to warrant his having their movements watched.

The message was vague enough, but it was sufficient to determine the movements of Baxenter and his companion. The deadlock

with which they had been faced at the ports of the Humber had made them greedy for action. The telegram had been sent to the Post Office at Hull, and there was ample time to reach King's Cross in order to catch the boat-train from Victoria.

CHAPTER IX

AT THE HÔTEL D'ÉCLAIR

M. BRIEUX stroked his pointed beard and looked through his pince-nez at Silas Berwick.

"Oh yes, my friend, I was glad to get your telegram. I cannot forget how you, as you say, 'saved my bacon' over the Bonillet affair. I have ever since longed for the time when I could in some way repay the debt."

Berwick bowed.

"Yes," went on the police official, "your message came just in time; your men, or whom I think are they, arrived Friday morning—that is, yesterday. I am sorry to say that my man has let them slip him."

"Then they are lost again?" Berwick's voice showed a keen disappointment.

M. Brieux gave an expressive shrug of the shoulders.

"I do not say that, m'sieu; it is but momentary. They put up at the little Hôtel d'Éclair, over near the Luxembourg. Their luggage is

still there, and the proprietress says they will return. We will go there together now. She is a friend of mine."

M. Brieux took his hat from the peg behind the office door, and, with a little bow, preceded his companions down the stairs to the boulevard. A white-hatted cocher drew up at the kerb, and soon the three men were rattling across the Place de l'Opéra and over the Seine to the Quartier Latin.

The city was looking at its best, and the brilliant sunshine had brought great crowds out to take their coffee or bock at the little tables outside the cafés. The chestnut trees still showed their gigantic white-spiked blossoms, and the gardens of the Luxembourg were gay with children.

The little Hôtel d'Éclair was an unpretentious middle-class hotel, situated in one of the narrow streets which straggle up from the Boulevard San Michael to the Montparnasse district. The window contained a few dishes of fruit and bottles of wine; behind these a green curtain hid the interior of the café from the passers-by. Half a dozen little marble-topped tables were arranged on the pavement under a green-striped awning, and a waiter was engaged in laying cloths on these and setting out the

cartes-du-jour. He looked up as the fiacre drew in to the kerb, and bowed the visitors in.

They entered between the trees in big green tubs and were met by the proprietress, who, on recognising M. Brieux, smiled her welcome. Like all Frenchwomen of her class, she was a creature of the emotions, and the visit of the distinguished policeman to her hotel evidently pleased her. There would be so much to talk of to the patrons who would soon be straggling in to take their *déjeuner* at the tables which showed their line of white-clothed emptiness to the back of the room, between the lines of faded mirrors.

She required but little persuasion to tell all she knew of the movements of her guests. Monsieur was right—yes—they had arrived yesterday at ten o'clock; she remembered the time—yes—for was it not at that moment that Jules had broken the big soup-tureen? —ten francs it had cost at the new china shop in the Rue Richelieu.

Her guests? Ah—yes—their luggage had been delivered an hour later, and an hour after that they had left the hotel, using the door that led out into the little impasse. They had taken a bottle of wine—yes—at that table

the furthest from the door, but they had eaten nothing.

They had said they would return — no, monsieur, they had stated no time. Their luggage was in their room—would monsieur and his friends like to see it? And might she ask the gentlemen to take a glass of wine, just a *petit verre*?—no—then would they follow her?

The proprietress walked behind the counter, laden with its crockery and fruit, and selected a key from a board on which were rows of hooks containing other keys; then made her way up the dark and winding staircase to the second floor, unlocking and holding open the door for the three men to enter.

It was an ordinary room, such as one finds in hotels of this class all over Paris. A large mahogany red-curtained bed took up fully half of the polished floor, the other furniture consisting of a miniature washstand and a few chairs. A mirror, its gilt frame swathed in dingy muslin, hung on the wall opposite the door.

The window, which opened inward, looked out on to the corner, and between two houses a little glimpse of the green Luxembourg Gardens was visible.

That the late occupants did indeed intend to

return was obvious, for a kit-bag and suit-case were standing in the corner by the bed. These were locked and very heavy. M. Brieux advised that they be left as they were; it would not do to tamper with them and arouse suspicion. He had put one of his assistants on to watch for the men's return —a reliable person, this time—who would also watch the door of the impasse.

Madame Renier led them between the little tables to the door and bowed them out. It had been no trouble—no—she had only been too delighted to aid monsieur. The waiter—doubtless the Jules of the tureen incident—bowed also, and then M. Brieux and his companions entered the waiting fiacre and rattled away.

Baxenter and Berwick took rooms for themselves in a comfortable hotel in the Boulevard San Michael, and during the day kept within doors. M. Brieux had promised to let them know at the earliest moment after the visitors to the Hôtel d'Éclair returned. As night fell, however, and the lights of the cafés beneath them twinkled out invitingly, the restraint became irksome, and at nine o'clock, leaving word where they were to be found, they went out on to the gaily lighted thoroughfare, and to supper at the Café d'Harcourt.

Perhaps there are few better places from which to watch the varied life of the Quartier than from this lively little café-restaurant, where the chairs and tables stand out on the boulevard, and extend round the corner and away up the Place de la Sorbonne. Before them, in a never-ending stream, the denizens of the district pass and repass—merry bands of bearded students off to their dinner at their own particular little *brasserie*, or on their way to the *Bulier*.

Their supper finished, Baxenter and Berwick sat out at a corner table enjoying the life around them and the cool air of the evening. From within the café the small orchestra was playing a popular waltz, and the melody reached them in little snatches, mixed with the clatter of crockery and the laughter of the diners. There was little traffic on the boulevard, save the gigantic double-decked steam-trams and taxis and fiacres bearing their patrons off to their pleasures. Beyond the railings opposite, the trees of the Gardens made a grey-green silhouette against the summer sky.

There were dark little openings over the way, too—tortuous, narrow, ill-lighted streets—and a few doors up one of these the men could see the corner windows of the Hôtel d'Éclair, and they fell again to the eternal discussion on what

it could be that had taken their quarry away from Paris so soon after their arrival—that was, presuming that they had left Paris.

That there was something further in the Dartigny inheritance than Robert was acquainted with was obvious. He did not think for one minute that the chest had contained enough valuables to warrant the almost Monte Cristo-like existence which Baptiste Dartin had led at Adderbury Towers.

Moreover, the man had been so reticent in speaking of his inheritance—in fact, the only time Robert remembered his mentioning it was that night at the Empire when he had presented the solicitor with the necklace, and then it was only to remark on its comparatively little value.

"What made them take that roundabout way of getting here, Berwick? They could have crossed quite safely by the ordinary route?"

Silas Berwick looked up as Baxenter spoke.

"Maybe they're known on the ordinary routes and were afraid of leaving a trail. Again, there is another reason—that is, their luggage. No doubt Dartin knows a way through where searching is not so strict as

the way we came ; those bags were very heavy."

"But there are customs everywhere, surely ?"

"Of course there are ; but suppose one crosses to, say Ghent or Terneuzen, it seems to me that one who knows the ropes could sneak into Paris—you'll remember that Brieux's man said they arrived without luggage at the station, and our friendly madame says it arrived after they did. You may be sure those bags passed no customs—"

The speaker broke off suddenly and gripped Robert's arm.

"—Isn't that one of them—look, getting out of the fiacre ?"

Robert gave one glance in the direction pointed out, and seized a file of *Le Matin* and held it up before his face while he spoke to Berwick. It was only a few words :

"Haverton, by all that's holy !"

The man had taken off his moustache and discarded the monocle which had seemed to be such an inseparable part of his personality. To Robert, who had known the suave manner of the man, his present unrest was all too apparent. His dusty attire, too, and his soiled linen, were as foreign to him as his manner.

Round the corner of the paper, held shieldwise before his face, Baxenter watched his prey.

Berwick, to whom the man was a stranger, needed no concealment, but regarded him openly though unconspicuously.

They expected every minute, at first, to see Dartin join the man under their observation, but Haverton did not seem to give one the impression that he expected anyone, but rather that he wished to take his refreshment unobserved. He had paid the cabman, and, after one glance at the crowds outside the café, had chosen one of the tables up the Place de la Sorbonne, the last one, where he took his seat and leant back in the angle of the glass screen, apparently a prey to the deepest dejection.

It was a position removed from observation and the lights, and had been evidently chosen for that reason. Eddie ordered a tall glass of beer, and, after drinking half of it at a draught, he now sat twirling the glass by its stem round and round in its little white saucer. Robert, as he watched him, remembered he had noticed the very same action at that last dinner-party at Adderbury Towers.

It was already late when Haverton arrived, and the crowds that had come down from the Bulier were thinning. The boulevards were becoming less crowded and the tired waiters were yawning sleepily behind the great plate-

glass windows. Intermittent bursts of merriment came from belated parties at their cards, and Robert noticed that the members of the little orchestra were putting away their instruments.

Still the figure at the far table showed no signs of leaving. Still he sat there twirling the glass, his eyes fixed moodily before him. A waiter who had been hovering near approached him, ostentatiously polishing the marble top of the table next to him and tipping up the vacant chairs. A shadow fell across the table as part of the lights within the café were switched off.

It seemed to the watching men as though Haverton had been asleep. He started up and stared dazedly at the waiter, then stood up with a slight shiver. He took a coin from his waistcoat pocket and passed it to the man; then, not waiting for any change, he buttoned up his coat, and without a glance at the few stragglers still at the tables, turned towards the boulevard.

A woman standing at the little passage between the chairs put out a hand as he passed, but he shook her off with an oath and hurried across the road. The men watched him as the narrow street which held the Hôtel d'Éclair swallowed him up.

A moment later they were following him. Once over the road, they kept well in the shadow of the houses; but their caution was unnecessary, the man before them looking neither to right or left, but making straight for the Hôtel d'Éclair, which was almost in darkness. After a little delay, the door was opened and he entered.

At the same moment a man emerged from the shadow of a doorway opposite and hurried to the corner. Here he spoke a word to another man, who went off towards the Seine at a run. The first man, whom Robert recognised as the assistant M. Brieux had put on watch, walked slowly back and, tapping at the door of the hotel, was in his turn admitted.

Berwick paused and drew Baxenter, who showed a disposition to enter also, into the dark doorway which the watcher had vacated. From its depth they watched the windows of the room they had visited that morning. They saw the glass doors pulled open, and the figure of Eddie Haverton as he leant over the little balcony, then a light appeared and the red curtains were half drawn.

On the ceiling they could see the gigantic shadow as the occupant of the room moved about, and noticed that it was thrown by a light that was at some low level — from

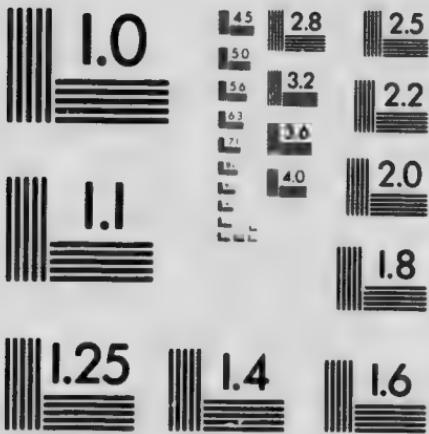
a candle placed on the floor, perhaps, or a chair-seat.

In about a quarter of an hour the light was extinguished, and Robert and his companion crossed the street and tapped softly on the door of the Hôtel d'Éclair.



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CHAPTER X

HAVERTON AT BAY

AT their knock, a voice on the other side of the door suddenly ceased, then was resumed in an excited whisper. There was a delay of a few minutes, and the door was cautiously unlatched and Brieux's man looked out.

At sight of Robert and Berwick he drew the door wide open, and they stepped into the dimly lighted café. Madame Renier, the picture of anticipation, nodded brightly as the police officer shut the door.

"Ah, messieurs, you have come at the good hour—he is but newly arrived and has gone to bed. Only one, messieurs, the other is not—" and madame made an expressive gesture.

"We know, madame, we have watched for his light to go out. We may go up?" queried Robert.

"But certainly, messieurs; M. Edouard and I will accompany you."

Berwick thought for a moment, and said a few words to Robert in English. Then he turned to the woman.

"If you will permit us, we would prefer to go alone. It is not a case of an arrest, and," looking towards M. Edouard, "it is not an official affair."

They received the pass-key from Madame Renier, and softly ascended the stairs. On the second-floor landing they stopped and listened at Haverton's door. From behind it came the unmistakable sounds of a sleeper. Either Mr Eddie Haverton was remarkably conscience free or remarkably tired.

Berwick turned the key softly in the lock, and the men entered without disturbing the slumbers of the man on the bed, and it was not until a match was struck and the candle spluttered into light that he started up—to find the steady hand of the man he had left in the cellars at Adderbury Towers holding a revolver a few inches from his head.

"Good evening, Mr Haverton. Less than a week since we parted—heavens! it seems a year—keep those hands away from your pillow—there—on the coverlet where I can see them—so!" Then, as Robert drew a Derringer from beneath the pillow: "I don't think you would do much harm with this—you haven't

the pluck; but it might go off—they do sometimes."

The man on the bed made no answer, but watched with sullen eyes while Berwick cut the cord from the window-blind and tied the hands on the coverlet deftly together.

This done, Robert put up his revolver, and together the two men began to examine the luggage. Their request for the keys raised no fight in Haverton; he nodded in the direction of his trousers, and in the pocket they found them.

At first sight the bags contained nothing but wearing apparel, but beneath this the searchers unearthed a quantity of jewellery and a considerable amount of gold coin. Between the garments, too, reposed a small fortune in notes. It was hardly to be wondered at that they wished to avoid the inquisitiveness of the Customs officers as much as possible. Robert noticed that the majority of the jewellery was engraved with the arms of the De Dartigny family.

"And what are you going to do with me?"

The voice from the bed was tremulous, and it seemed as if Haverton's lips had formed a question, the answer to which he dreaded to hear.

Robert turned from his examination of the treasure and seated himself on the edge of bed.

"That, my dear Haverton, depends a great deal on the attitude you take up—what you tell us."

"As to that, Mr Baxenter, I'll tell you what you like. Can't you see I'm knocked?"

"Well—where's the other one?"

"The other one?"

"Yes—Vivian—Baptiste, whichever you like to call him."

For a moment a look of terror passed over Eddie's face and the bound hands trembled on the coverlet.

"I believe he's dead—he must be dead—I waited—before God! I waited—it was horrible listening there—oh! he's dead all right—I—"

Baxenter turned on him sharply.

"Don't drivel like that, man. What is it that's happened? Where have you been the last two days?"

"Chauville—he made me go—he said I could help him—I did wait—I swear I waited—"

Berwick seized a bottle containing brandy that stood on the crazy little table, and, pouring some into a glass, held it to the lips of the man on the bed. Its effect was immediate,

and slowly they extracted the story from him.

He had been hurried off the morning before to Blois, and from there had walked out to an inn called the "Three Lilies"—Haverton remembered the name of the inn, although they had not stopped there. They had passed it and entered an avenue of trees at the end of which, and across a moat, stood a château. Dartin had sworn when he saw that the windows were lit up, and had cursed his luck. Eventually they had left the avenue, and skirting the moat, had reached a little wood of pines, in which stood a chapel which they had entered through a window.

The listeners attended breathlessly to the tale of how Renton had removed the slab from a tomb in the chapel floor and descended by means of a rope they had brought with them. He had instructed Haverton to replace the slab and wait patiently in the shadow of the pews for two hours, or until he heard a tapping, when he was to reopen the tomb and let Vivian out.

Haverton told them how he had waited until the dawn had entered the church before he heard a faint tapping, but he had been unable to work the mechanism that moved the great stone. Then he had heard the sound of a

fall, and there had been no more tapping after that, and at last Haverton had left his companion to his fate, and had slunk back to Paris.

To Robert and Berwick the story would have sounded like a fairy tale but for the fact that the narrator's voice carried with it an unmistakable conviction. After all, what had Haverton to gain by lying? If, as he said, he had waited until all hope of releasing Renton was past, they could hardly blame him for saving his own skin. The man seemed indeed to welcome the telling of the tale—perhaps there was yet a way to save the man below the floor of the chapel. Then the crime of Hubert's death would be brought home to Dartin, and not to him.

The solicitor spoke.

"Mr Haverton," he said quietly, "listen carefully to what I say. It's in your power to right a wrong—not *your* wrong. I have no particular quarrel with you. I have Renton's own word for it that he alone killed my cousin"—the face of Haverton cleared at this—"I want you to take us, as soon as we can get a train, to this château you speak of. Renton mustn't die like a rat in a trap, even if we save him for another kind of end. Good night, Mr Haverton; we will call for you in time for

the first train for Blois. And, by the way, there is a gentleman downstairs who will spend the rest of the night with you. It'll keep you from feeling lonely after your vigil in the chapel. Besides, it's safer."

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CHAPTER XI

IN THE CHAPEL

THE tiny village of Massey was stirred to its very depths. Never within the memory of its oldest inhabitants had it been singled out as a stage for the world's happenings. Small wonder, then, that what little amount of work as was usually done should be put aside on this sunny afternoon, and that twos and threes should congregate in the scented little cottage gardens, and that many an old man should forego his after-dinner siesta that he might take his place in the low-roofed parlour of the "Three Lilies," there to discuss the facts—and, when they failed, the fictions—of the strange happenings up at the château.

For old Henri, there had never dawned such a day. The pride he had always felt at showing the glories of the mansion to visitors was nothing to this. For the time being, the old man was the centre of the village, a position of which he was careful to make the most.

The sunlight pierced the little foliage-framed panes of the window, and lit up the eager faces of the villagers as they leant forward and listened to the story.

"And you yourself heard the groanings?"

It was the smith, who had left his forge to take care of itself for an hour, who put the question, and he put it with all reverence.

Henri took the pipe from his lips.

"Have I not told you that I did, Jean? I only hope you will never hear the like. Strong nerves are necessary, and"—with pardonable pride—"I was equal to the occasion."

Henri applied himself to his glass, and for the fifth time plunged into the details of his story. In their rapt attention they had hardly noticed the entry of three strangers, who had ordered wine and taken their seats near the door.

At the first words of the old man's story, Berwick was all attention. To Baxenter, good French scholar though he was, the patois made the tale rather scrappy, but he could make out enough to tell that the subject was the same that had brought them to Chauville. To the cosmopolitan Silas, however, it was plain, and he related, in the pauses of the narrative, its salient points to his companion. Haverton sat a little remote from the others,

and, understanding no French, took no interest in what was going on.

The three men had left Paris, as arranged, by the earliest train, and after taking lunch at Blois, had walked over to Massey. The heat was oppressive and the way dusty, and the visit to the "Three Lilies" had been opportune.

Haverton had during the day maintained his sullen manner of the night before. He spoke but rarely, and, indeed, as he thought of the information—the king's evidence, as it were—that he had given to his captors, he felt a dull resentment at his treatment. It seemed to him that he was doomed to come off very badly in the affair altogether.

Of the mystery that evidently surrounded the Château Chauville and its chapel he knew nothing, and cared less; in the killing of Hubert Baxenter he had had no hand; why, then, was he tramping dusty roads with two men who practically held him prisoner?

He wished with all his soul that, when he had located Vivian Renton at Adderbury Towers, he had let the sleeping dog lie. He should have taken warning by his last association with that gentleman. It seemed to him very unfair that he should be eternally called upon to pay the piper to Vivian's dancing. In fact,

Mr Eddie Haverton was filled with a very real pity for himself.

He sat with his head leaning back on the old cracked plaster of the wall, smoking a cigar and gazing out through the open doorway moodily, seeing nothing of the beauties of the sun-kissed countryside. His thoughts were of a cosy flat overlooking Hyde Park, and of all the niceties and luxuries of a well-to-do man in London, glories which he told himself were no more to be his.

One by one the villagers, satiated with news, departed to convey their knowledge to, and shine with a reflected glory among, their waiting families. As old Henri, his occupation gone, prepared to follow them, Berwick touched him on the shoulder.

"A moment, monsieur. I have been listening to your graphic description. I think I would like to hear a little more. A bottle of wine, now. I am a journalist from Paris; your story would read well, I think, and would be well paid for."

Nothing loth, the old man settled again into his chair. It was not the monetary aspect which influenced him so much as the thought of seeing his story, and perchance his name, in print. A few of the Parisian journals filtered through, from time to time, to Massey, to be

read and re-read by the inhabitants, and Henri in imagination already saw the personal glory of the flaring headlines.

The wine was brought, and, under its mellow influence, the old man opened out; if the story was to appear in print, then it should be a good one, and lack no gruesome detail.

"It was this morning, ~~morning~~, when I paid my visit to the chapel. It is my custom to go there at ten o'clock each morning, to see that all is as it should be; for, messieurs, there are many valuable articles on the little altar—a fourteenth-century cross studded with amethysts, and two candlesticks which were once in the possession of Pius the Sixth. You might say in your paper, monsieur, that I, Henri Biblot, have the entire care of these treasures—B-i-b-l-o-t; yes—one 't.'

"This morning everything seemed in its place, and I was about to leave the chapel when I heard a sound beneath my feet—a low, hollow groan, and coming from the ancient tomb of the Dartignys."

The man paused for the effect of his words; then he tapped his chest impressively.

"I am not a coward, messieurs; I gained the cross at Sedan. But I confess, as I heard this, I was afraid. You have not seen the tomb? No? Well, it is covered in with a

movable slab, worked by means of a lever concealed in the ironwork of the railings. My fear was only momentary, and, in a few minutes, I had slid this stone back and peered down into the darkness.

"The floor of the vault, you must know, lies some ten or twelve feet beneath that of the chapel, and at first I was unable to make out anything in the gloom. I took a candle from the altar — the saints forgive me the sacrilege — and managed to lower it a few feet."

The old man ceased speaking and took a long drink from his tumbler, then he went on :

"The last to be interred in the vault, messieurs, was Armand Raoul de Dartigny, who fell gloriously at the battle of Jemappes. As was the custom, the coffin lay on the raised bier directly beneath the opening, for each Dartigny lay there until another burial took place, when his remains were put in their niche to make room for the new-comer. To my horror, I saw that this coffin was broken, and I could see bones, messieurs, among the splintered wood. Then I saw something else —the shapeless body of a gentleman huddled in a heap on the floor of the vault. Perhaps the light from my candle served to rouse

him somewhat, for he moved a little and groaned."

Henri passed a shaking hand across his brow.

"That groan, messieurs—I can hear it now, moaning among the echoes of that tomb. For the second time, I am not ashamed to say it, I was unnerved. I made all haste to my master, and, by means of a ladder and ropes, we were able to raise the poor fellow and bring him——"

"And he was a stranger to you?" Berwick's interruption was abrupt.

For a moment a curious look came into the old man's eyes, and he remembered a certain charming artist to whom he had been rather obliging in the matter of entrance to the château. What if he had already said too much to this journalist from Paris. Perhaps he thought that he was on dangerous ground, for, as he answered, he rose and took up his hat and stick from the table.

"A stranger, monsieur, yes."

Berwick laid a detaining hand on his arm.

"One minute—who is the present owner of the château?"

"Monsieur de Barron—the banker."

"Of the Rue Lafayette?"

Henri nodded.

"Then tell your master, if you please, that friends of Monsieur Lemercier, his neighbour in the Rue Lafayette, will do themselves the honour of calling upon him within the hour. They will have something of importance to say to him with reference to the man in the tomb."

"I will, monsieur. Lemercier, I will remember the name—and—you will understand, will you not, that the man is a perfect stranger to me—a—"

Silas Berwick patted the old bent back.

"A perfect stranger, Henri—I understand."

Left to themselves, Berwick ran over the story again in English for the benefit of Haverton, who, however, seemed to have made up his mind to show no further interest in a matter which, to his thinking, was none of his business. If these men liked to interest themselves in Vivian Renton, they could do so; personally he had no desire to see, or even hear the name of, his late companion now that he knew Baxenter was aware of the truth of his cousin's death. His acquaintance with the man found in the tomb had never benefited Eddie Haverton.

An hour later, the three men were sitting in the panelled dining-room of the Château

Chauville. With them, and listening with eager ears to the romantic tale Baxenter was telling, was Monsieur de Barron. The eminent banker being conversant with the English tongue, Robert was the better able to make his story clear, and the kindly old eyes of the courteous owner of the château glittered as he learnt the romance which surrounded his home.

Robert told, as well as he could remember it, the story of the flight of the old aristocrat from the terrors of '93, and of the claims of Stella Benham to the chest he had delivered up to the impostor, to the man who now was lying unconscious in the little chapel.

For, on rescuing Dartin from the tomb, they had made up a bed of sorts for him in one of the old-fashioned square pews while they sent in for a doctor from Blois, and the medical man had forbidden that the stranger's last hours should be rendered more painful by his removal. The injuries, he said, were caused by some fall, presumably from the coffin on the stone bier. Truly, it seemed that fate had ordained that the last hours of Vivian Renton should be spent in a better place than the rest of his life had been.

Monsieur de Barron had told them of how they had found the sufferer. He had evidently

climbed upon the coffin of old Armand Raoul de Dartigny, and the time-worn wood, being unequal to the weight, had given way. It was not very far to fall, and Dartin had sustained injuries to his head which were slight enough. What was more serious, however, was a broken rib, the point of which, the doctor had told Monsieur de Barron, entered the base of the lung.

In his pockets they had found a quantity of jewellery; and beside him a little heap of jewelled vessels, and a few choice pictures which had been cut from their frames and rolled together to make carrying easier.

The banker, who was by way of being a connoisseur, took the men to his study and showed them his spoils. Among them there was no article that could be less than a hundred and fifty years old, and the vases and some of the jewellery were marked with the Dartigny crest. The pictures, from lack of proper care, were in bad condition, and this taking into account the great age of some of the canvases, made them unrecognisable. But there were some which were undoubtedly of great value.

Monsieur de Barron locked the treasure away and turned to Baxenter. "I suppose they are as well here as anywhere for the

present, Mr Baxenter, although I may say, here and now, that I lay no claim to what I consider does not belong to me. If, and indeed it seems probable, this poor fellow in the chapel has stumbled upon the Dartigny treasure, then it belongs to a Dartigny and not to me."

"But, monsieur, I feel sure that Miss Benham would not wish to—"

The financier held up a restraining hand.

"Perhaps you, as a solicitor, will tell me that I have a legal claim; but I am not that sort of man. Besides, suppose it were so, what is to prevent a childless old man from making a present? No, Mr Baxenter, I have quite enough for my few remaining years without taking what belongs to others."

They had shut the door upon the treasures and were on their way to the dining-room when they came upon old Henri looking for them. The man in the chapel had regained consciousness, but the doctor did not give him very long to live. Perhaps Monsieur de Barron would come and see him?

The old caretaker led the way out through the French windows and across the level carpet of the lawn to where the little towers of the chapel appeared above the dark feathery tops of the pines, which stood out

sombrelly against the saffron western sky and looked like funeral plumes in the half light of the evening.

Henri drew back at the little Gothic doorway to allow his master to precede him. The latter looked over his shoulder and spoke to Robert.

"Come with me, Mr Baxenter; the others, perhaps, will wait here. It will be kinder not to excite the man over much."

As they entered the cool quietude of the sacred building, Robert felt intuitively that he stood in the presence of death, and in his heart was nothing but pity for the debonair rogue who lay there, conquered at last.

His head, swathed in stained bandages, lay back on a pillow in the angle of the pew, and he rolled the eyes which looked so large in the white face, restlessly from side to side. There was something ghostly in all the whiteness against the black oak panelling.

The eyes came to a standstill at last, resting on the figure of the man whom fate had made his enemy, and a tired smile curved for a moment the pale lips. When he spoke, it was slowly and with difficulty, so that the solicitor had to bend over to catch his words :

"So, my dear Robert, we meet a little sooner

than I expected. I—I'm afraid I've made rather a mess of things."

He waited, but Robert did not raise his head.

"—glad you've come, Baxenter—what I told you of your cousin's death was truth—God's truth! I've been bad through and through, but I've never killed a man intentionally. I had lost heavily that night, and only intended to take back my money. How differently we look upon the web of our life when we are dying; what a hideous tangle it seems when we have come to the end and look back!"

Dartin's voice became weaker, and the doctor moistened his lips from a tumbler. After a few moments, he went on:

"I chanced upon the parchment in my search for the money—you can guess the rest. It was a good game while it lasted. Who's that standing behind you—there, in the shadow?"

"That's Monsieur de Barron, Darti', the owner of---"

"Oh!—yes—I know. I owe monsieur an apology. This is not the first time I have visited his château. Feel round my neck, Baxenter, will you?—here, beneath the shirt, I——"

The sufferer closed his eyes, and Robert, as

he felt, shuddered at the cold clamminess of his chest. The doctor bent forward to assist, and, by a silken ribbon, the man drew out a wash-leather bag. Robert put it in his pocket without a second glance, and stood looking down at the pallid face. The eyes remained closed, and he turned to leave the chapel. Then he heard his name again whispered, and he bent again over the pillow.

"You — believe — the accident?" Renton fumbled for the solicitor's hand. "Forgive—" Robert pressed the fingers that had found and tightened round his. It was better than words.

At the door of the chapel he turned again. He never forgot the scene. Two candles had been lit, and in their tall candlesticks burnt steadily, and made a little oasis of light around the pew in which the dying man lay, and touched into points of radiance the communion service on the altar. The fading light of day filled the chapel with an elusive sheen through which the statues and carvings loomed in strange shapes.

Vivian Renton had turned his face on the pillow so that it faced the altar. His eyes were still closed, but his lips moved ever so slightly. The tall, frock-coated doctor watched him anxiously.

Baxenter tip-toed from the place and rejoined Berwick and Haverton in the little wood, the three men following the master of Chauville as he led the way back to the house.

The scene in the chapel filled the solicitor's mind and gave him pity for all rogues. He slackened his steps and touched Haverton on the arm.

"There doesn't seem much hope, Mr Haverton; perhaps you would like to see him?"

But Eddie shook off his touch with an oath, and said that he was not a man of sentiment—especially where Vivian Renton was concerned. It would be more to the point if they would tell him what they intended doing with him.

Baxenter's eyes blazed and his knuckles stood out, patches of tight skin on his clenched hands.

"I think, Haverton, that you are the most despicable creature that God ever let live. The man back there," and he pointed to where the windows of the chapel shone wanly between the boles of the pines, "is a king to you. You want to know what we are going to do with you? Mr Berwick and I have not yet decided. In the meantime, you will go back and wait for us at the 'Three Lilies.' You're quite safe there with no money and no French. March!"

They stood and watched until the figure of Eddie Haverton had slouched away in the direction of the inn, then hurried after Monsieur Barron.

"There must be some connection — some passage between the tomb and this."

Monsieur de Barron held the candle well above his head and surveyed the chamber which for over a century had had no visitor save only Vivian Renton.

"To think," the old gentleman went on, "that for all these long years I have sat and had my dinner, and entertained my friends, not ten feet from an Aladdin's cave! One would have almost thought that some voice out of the past would have whispered its secret. Miss Benham is a lucky girl."

The key, and the directions as to the apple in the carving of the panel, had been found in the chamois bag. With his last breath Dartin had made what reparation he could, and the secret of the Dartignys was a secret no longer.

That the man who had so successfully impersonated the last of a noble race had made good use of his visits was apparent from the opened and emptied chests and caskets. In fact, there was comparatively little of

value left that was portable. The larger plate and pictures were still in the chamber, and had Vivian got away with the heap of jewels and vessels found beside him in the vault, it is not likely that he would have thought it worth while ever again to visit his treasure-house. It was evidently to be a final haul.

The two Englishmen dined at the château with Monsieur de Barron and the doctor from Blois. The latter was interested more in his late patient than in the mystery of the case, and talked learnedly about the spine and the lungs. There would be an inquiry, he said; but, if monsieur did not wish it, the whole affair need not be made public. Henri had confessed to him that the man had visited the château before; he was an antiquarian, doubtless, and — well he had met with an accident. Any inquirers would have to be satisfied with that.

The doctor shrugged his shoulders and poured out a glass of Burgundy.

"I will see my friend in Blois about it, Monsieur de Barron; you will not be annoyed."

It was late when Berwick and the solicitor reached the "Three Lilies," and they inquired at once for Mr Haverton. The host told them he had gone back to Paris. He had

seemed to be in a great hurry, and had left a letter for messieurs. Baxenter tore open the envelope.

"GENTLEMEN,—I have decided, on second thoughts, not to await your decision as to what is to be done with me. Your remarks as to my having no money are somewhat wide of the mark. The luggage at the Hôtel d'Éclair is Renton's; mine is in a safe place, and contains enough, I imagine, for me to live in comparative comfort for the rest of my life.

"My theatrical enterprises in England I disposed of to my manager the day I ran up to London from Adderbury Towers.

"Whether I shall choose England as my future home I cannot say. I think not.—E. H."

Berwick, when this was read out to him, laughed.

"Just as well, eh, Baxenter? We wouldn't have known what to do with the beast, anyway. What are you going to do with the money—I mean Vivian's—and the Towers?"

"I reckon that Stella should have something to say to that. It's hers; but, if I know her, she won't touch a penny. I expect a hospital will have it in the long run. As to the Towers, I'll just let it rip. The man only rented it,

and I don't fancy anything out of the place myself. The furniture was expensive, but too flashy, and the pictures were—well—tripe. In any case, I don't intend to 'et the police rake up poor Hubert's death again if I can help it. I suppose Barchester will be agog with mystery for nine days, then they will shake their heads and say that 'they always said that there was something fishy about that fellow Dartin,' and the landlord will step in, and then will be a sale.

"Can't you see the society dames of Barchester entering the Towers for the first and last time to view the lots? You know how these things are. I wonder what the auctioneer will think when he comes across the dress suit I wore in the cellar. Luckily, there is no mark on it to show it's mine."

Berwick smiled.

"I think you're right to let it go," he said. "It's been a romantic tangle, but only our own little circle know the details. There is no good raking up the past; it can't do Hubert any good. Haverton doesn't know anything about Stella's fortune, and, in any case, I think we've seen the last of him. Now I'm for that little room under the roof—and bed."

But Robert Baxenter sat late writing a letter to Stella, in which he asked her to break her

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contract immediately, as Haverton had disposed of his companies. He added that he would be in Paris in a week's time, where he would take rooms at the "Meurice" for her mother and herself, and await them there.

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CHAPTER XII

CONCLUSION

A FAINT breeze came across the plains and carried with it the elusive murmur of bells. The sun, deep crimson, and barred with a belt of grey cloud, was touching the topmost pine in the little wood which showed black and clear-cut on the western horizon, and the air was sweet with the scents of evening. A bee still hung suspended over the purple clumps of heather, as though reluctant to leave the scene of his labours.

"And you must really go to-morrow, Bobby?"

The young man bent his head and looked tenderly down into the grey eyes lifted to his.

"I'm afraid there's no help for it, dearest. Old Cantle is well enough in his way, but he's getting old; it's time I was back in harness. Besides, September will be on us—and there are many things for us to arrange, eh, Stella?"

The girl blushed prettily.

"I suppose there are, Bobby, but I do wish we didn't have to live in London. Do you know, I think I must really be French at heart. I seem to have felt at home, so completely, all these wonderful weeks. I just love my new ancestors and this romantic old home that was theirs."

They paused in their walk, and turning, brought the towers of Chauville into view, rising proudly into the copper blue of the sky. From their base, the lawns terraced gradually to the very edge of the moat and seemed to mingle there with the water-lilies and the reflections. Two swans rode majestically beneath the stone bridge.

From the windows of the dining-room the lamps cut squares of rosy radiance. Within the room they could see the bent figure of old Henri as he hovered round the table, adding a deft touch here and there to the glass and silver. Through the still air came the muffled music of a gong.

"Why, Bobby, here we've been idling away the time, and you're not dressed. See!" and Stella threw open her coat and showed the simple white dinner-frock beneath. "I'm all ready, and so is mother. Run; you've got ten minutes. I'll come on slowly."

It was a merry little party that sat down

to dinner that night. The French windows were thrown open to the perfumed twilight; in the darkening blue of the sky stars were here and there appearing, and a young moon was showing faintly.

Robert's departure was not mentioned until the table had been cleared, and the decanters and fruit shone on the polished oak. Monsieur de Barron spoke of it first.

"And so, Mr Baxenter, this is your last night with us?"

Robert looked up and smiled from Stella to his host.

"It is, sir, to my sorrow. I'm afraid I have neglected my work quite long enough."

The white-haired old man at the head of the table did not answer at once. He filled his glass and passed the decanter over to Robert.

"What cause is there for you to work?—no, don't interrupt me. I want you to listen. It's a delicate subject, perhaps, to touch upon; but you are all here together, you and Stella and Madame. I will tell you a little history."

Monsieur de Barron put a match to his cigar and smoked thoughtfully for a moment, then:

"Once upon a time—that is the way stories open, is it not?—a certain young merchant of Lille found himself, at the early age of thirty, a

wealthy man. His money had been made mostly by the opening up of the railways of Canada, and he married, on one of his visits to that country, the daughter of an official in Montreal. It was a love-match, and, when a little girl was born to them, their happiness——”

The old man broke off suddenly, a little sad smile passing over his face.

“—Oh, there is no need to speak in parables,” he went on. “My wife was a very distant descendant of the family who, in former times, owned this place. Her cousin’s grandfather had emigrated to Canada at the beginning of last century—and it was to please Marcelle that I bought back the château, and in those days I looked forward to a life of happiness. But it was a Dead Sea fruit.

“Two years after settling here the fever came to Blois. It did not spare, and I was left alone—embittered. I threw myself into the world of finance and, as is often the way, the luck was with me, and money, which I had ceased to care for, accumulated rapidly. And in the summer I would come here and people the lawns with the forms of those who were gone. In my mind’s eye I would watch them until my soul rebelled at the self-torture. I shut up the house and went abroad—China, India, it was all the same

to me—and at last, I returned here cured as far as there is a cure for a broken heart."

The tears were standing in Stella's grey eyes as she listened.

Monsieur de Barron leant over the table and took the little hands between his.

"I know, now, why I came back. Do you know, Stella, that my little Pauline would have been about your age had she lived? I can trace—a fancy, maybe, but one I would not lose—a faint likeness. After all, you are of the same blood. Do you not see what I want? I am old, and I have not had much happiness. Is it too late? I want my dream-child out there on the lawn to have a playmate, one who will clatter up and down these old oak stairs—I want laughter and singing to be heard again in these old rooms. Robert here must let another Baxenter have his business and come and help me in mine—No, I will not hear a word now, you must talk it over together—"

The old man rose, and, walking to the window, pointed to the little copse of pines.

"Come here, my children. There is an alley-way between the trees there; Marcelle used to say it was designed by Cupid himself. At times the nightingales sing there. They sang there years ago. There are ghosts in the

shadows of that little alley-way—ghosts of the past." He drew back with a smile, holding aside the curtain, and Robert gave his arm to Stella.

They passed out over the moonlit lawns to the alley-way, designed by Cupid himself, where the nightingales sing.

THE END

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